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R. E. Locke

THE MINISTER'S WIFE



THE LETTER.

Oliphant, Mrs. Margaret Oliphant (Wils)



The Minister's Wife

(MRS OLIPHANT)

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THE MINISTER'S WIFE

CHAPTER I

THE Glebe Cottage at the head of Loch Diarmid was something between a primitive cottage and a little house of gentility, commonly called by that name. The hill-side of which it was the sole inhabitant had once been ecclesiastical soil belonging to the church of Lochhead, which was about a mile distant across the braes—and still, so far as this one dwelling was concerned, retained the name. It had originally been a building of one story thatched and mossy; but lately a few additional rooms had been built over one part of it, and covered with respectable slates. It was composite and characteristic, a human thing, growing out of human rules, and consequently more picturesque than if it had been the result of the most picturesque intention. The thatched end of the cottage was surrounded by no enclosure; the soft rich mossy grass of the hills broken by great bushes of heather pressed up to its very walls; while the other half, or western end, was cultivated and formed into a pretty homely garden. Hardy roses and honeysuckles, and a wavering wealth of fuchsias, hanging rich with crimson bells, clothed the southern front and west end—the refined part of the cottage. On the mountain side, there was nothing but the rough, low whitewashed wall, the overhanging thatch, the heather within a yard of the house. And here, some thirty years ago, lived a family of Diarmids, as curiously varied in internal constitution as was the aspect of their home.

The father of the household had been a soldier 'in the war,' and, though little more than a peasant by birth, had risen from the ranks and won his commission by sheer daring and bravery. It is very doubtful whether he was much the happier for it. When he had won his epaulettes another piece of luck befell him: he caught the eye and fancy of a pretty, romantic girl, who married him for his valour and his inches and his red coat. To him

she was an heiress, though the actual amount of her wealth was small. Probably he meant, in his gratitude and pride, to be a good husband and live happy ever after, and for this end bought the cottage he had been born in, and added some modern additions to it for the comfort of his lady-wife. But Duncan was Duncan still, notwithstanding his good fortune and his epaulettes; and his poor young wife, finding out her mistake, died at the end of a year or two, after bringing a pair of twin girls into the world. After this Captain Diarmid saw a great deal of service in all quarters of the world, and when he came back married again, a homely 'neighbour lass,' and died after she too had become the mother of two children. They all lived together in the Glebe Cottage—two sets of people as different as could well be conceived. During the Captain's lifetime a certain arbitrary link united them; but after his death it was not expected by the country-side that there could be any further family union between the twin sisters to whom everything belonged, and the homely widow with her girl and boy. It was a wonder to many of the genteel people of the neighbourhood when it was discovered that Margaret and Isabel meant to permit their father's widow, Jean Campbell, to share their house. Even old Miss Catherine at the Lochhead gave it as her opinion that 'Jean and her bairns had no claim on them.' But the sisters, it was evident, thought differently, though it was not without a certain conflict within and between themselves that the decision was made. They were then between nineteen and twenty, two girls who had grown up as Nature would, with little training of any description, but with that curious refinement of race or tradition which is so often to be found in those who, springing from a higher origin, have yet lived chiefly among the poor. They were 'ladies born,' as was acknowledged by 'all the Loch'—and universal respect was paid them; although they were not, except on formal occasions, dignified by the title of 'the Miss Diarmids,' but were generally distinguished only as 'the Captain's Margaret,' and 'the Captain's Isabel.' Margaret had fallen into bad health some years before her father's death, and sickness and a more elevated type of character had made her as much the elder of the two as if her seniority had been a matter of years instead of minutes. It was she whose will had prevailed in respect of her stepmother.

'She was his wife after all,' Margaret had said, 'and they are our brother and sister. We have no right to forget that——'

'She had no right to be his wife!' said hasty Isabel.

with sudden tears. 'If she were a poor body in a cot-house do you think I would grudge her anything? but I cannot bear it, because she's thought to belong to us—her and those weary bairns.'

'They are my father's bairns,' said the invalid; and then she added after a pause, 'And I hope they are God's bairns, Bell—and you too.'

'Me!' said Isabel, looking round, as with a hasty determination even to deny this bond of union; but when the meaning of the words reached her, a shade of compunction, a gleam of sorrow, shot one after another over her face which expressed all she thought, 'Oh, Margaret, no like you,' cried the impulsive girl, 'no like you!'

'Dinna break my heart,' said the other, falling in her emotion into the soft vernacular which both in their composed moments avoided; 'are we not all God's bairns? But we shut our hearts and shut our door the one on the other; the like of us can be grand and proud and high—but the like of Him was neighbour and mair to all the poor folk. We ay forget that.'

'*You* never forget,' said Isabel; 'I'll do what you like, my dear, my dear! I'll serve them on my knees night and day if you'll but stay and be content.'

'I'm very content to stay,' said Margaret, with a smile, '—too content. It's not for me to judge; but, Bell, we'll never be parted if I stay or if I go.'

To this the other girl made no answer, but fell down on her knees beside the invalid's chair, and hid her face in her sister's dress, weeping there in silence. Margaret laid her thin hand upon the bright hair and smoothed it tenderly. She was no older than the creature at her feet, and yet it seemed to be her child, warm with all the passion of life, whom she was caressing in her calm and patience. And she smiled, though Isabel saw it not.

'I'll go no further than to Him,' she said, 'and you've ay access to Him at all times. I'll take a grip of His robe that's made of light, and I'll hear your voice when He's listening to you. I'll tell Him it's my sister:—as if He needed us to tell Him,' she added, with a soft laugh of contempt at herself; and her eyes lighted up in her pale face, and went away far beyond Isabel kneeling at her side, far beyond the homely walls and little humble house.

By and by Isabel's weeping ceased, and she became aware, by her sister's silence, and by the chill touch of the hand which rested on her head, that Margaret's mind had stolen away from all their trials and troubles. She rose up softly, not disturbing her, and throwing one piteous look at the pale, soft countenance, withdrew to a corner. One or two hot, hasty tears fell on the work

she had taken up mechanically. It was little Mary's black frock, her other sister—Jean Campbell's little girl. That was how Isabel succinctly described the children; Jean Campbell's bairns; and was that to be all she would have for a sister when God had His way?

This was how it came to be settled that Jean Campbell and her bairns should remain in the Glebe Cottage. Jean had few qualifications for the office of guardian to these girls, but she was in some sort a protector to them, and took care of their goods and managed their humble affairs. She was not a woman of such elevation of character as might have fitted her to take the command of the situation; but she was one of those kind and faithful souls who so often hide the sweeter qualities of their nature under an almost harsh, quite uncaressing and undemonstrative appearance. She, too, had mother-wit enough to see through the Captain, though no doubt his rank had dazzled her at first; but now that Captain Duncan was gone, she would have defended his memory to her last breath, and she was very good and tender in her own way to his daughters. She accepted her position loyally, without any attempt to better or change it. The state of Margaret's health was too apparent to leave bystanders in any doubt; and Jean was often uneasy—it is impossible to disguise the fact—as to what might become of herself and her children in such a case.

But in the meantime she was very kind to her husband's daughters, and cared for their goods as if they had been her own, and was a faithful servant to them. She and her children were as comfortable in their end of the cottage as were Margaret and Isabel in their half, to which by times the gentlefolks of the district would come as visitors, out of consideration for the good blood which ran in their veins by their mother's side. It was Isabel who was the representative sister out-of-doors, and whom Miss Catherine carried with her to return calls, and make such return as was possible to the civilities of her neighbours and connections. But it was Margaret who was the queen within and received all the homage. Day by day, however, carried the elder sister more out of the range of worldly affairs. It was, as Jean said, 'a decline' that had seized her. Not a violent disease, but a soft fading. The current of her life kept shrinking into always a narrower and a narrower channel. She still went every day to a certain spot on the hill-side above the house, where a little burn went trickling from stone to stone, and a mountain-ash drooped its leafy branches over a little green knoll. For many years it had been her daily custom to sit and ponder, or to pray in this silent grassy place. It was long before she knew that any-

one watched her daily pilgrimage: but nothing escapes the keen inspection of a rural community. When it had just begun to be a toil to her to seek her little oratory, a poor mother from the village, who had been hanging wistfully about, accosted her with a humble petition that she would 'think upon' a suffering child 'when she gaed up bye to the brae.' It was too late then for her to change or to hide her custom, and by degrees she became used to the petition. She went up with tremulous, feeble step day after day, bearing upon her tender soul the burden of other people's troubles, penitences, and fears. Not a soul in the parish would willingly have gone that way to disturb the saintly creature, as she knelt under her rowan-tree, with the soft burn singing in her ear, and the soft breeze blowing her hair; and offered her offering and made her intercession. They were stern Puritans in the village below, and rampant Protestants; but they sent their white spotless virgin to intercede for them, with a faith which no doctrine could shake.

She was stealing down softly in the slowly falling twilight, when the country was brightening into spring, six months after her father's death. She had a warm shawl wrapped closely round her shoulders, and her step was not quite steady as she left the soft grass of the hillside for the path. It was but a few yards to the cottage, but her strength was no more than equal to the exertion. There were two people standing waiting for her near the door; one of them a tall, vigorous, old lady, wrapped like herself in a large, soft, black and white shawl, who stood talking, with some eagerness, to the clergyman of the parish, a fresh, rural, middle-aged man, with clear eyes, clear complexion, and a general distinctness about him. It was Miss Catherine of the Lochhead who was speaking to the minister. Family names were unusual in the parish, for the population, with some trifling exceptions, were all Diarmids. Miss Catherine was in some respects the squire of the district. Her brother, it is true, was the real laird, but he was seldom at home, and Miss Catherine reigned in his stead. She was discussing the great topic of the moment with Mr. Lothian; and the two were not quite agreed.

'Don't speak to me about miracles,' said Miss Catherine. 'I'm not one of your believing kind. I don't deny that some of the things are very surprising, but they're all to be accounted for. We are surrounded by surprising things. I never lift my hand to my head, but when I think of it, it is a wonder to me—but as for direct miracles——'

'Here is Margaret,' said the minister; 'we'll ask her; you all believe her better than you'll ever believe me.'

Margaret came up with her slightly faltering, uncertain step as he spoke; and the two gazed at her with that mingled awe and pity which a creature standing on the boundary between life and death naturally calls forth in every sympathetic soul. Mr. Lothian drew her hand through his arm as her father might have done.

'You should not walk so far till you get stronger,' he said. Margaret looked at him with a smile, and shook her head.

'You know I will never get stronger,' she said. 'It is not like you to say what you don't mean. But you'll come in. My feet are failing already, and it's not often we see Miss Catherine here.'

'My dear,' said the old lady, speaking quickly as if to shake the tears out of her voice, 'the horses are all busy at the plough, and I'm a poor walker. I always hear how you are all the same.'

'You're vexed to look at me,' said Margaret. 'I know what you mean. You're like to break your heart when you see my face; but I'm not grieved for my part. I cannot see what great difference there can be between this world and the other. God is ay the same. I would like to see Isabel and know that the poor bairns are doing as they ought—'

'Oh, Margaret, do not break my heart with your bairns,' cried Miss Catherine, with tears in her eyes. 'It's you I'm thinking of—I care nothing for other folk.'

'You would hate me if I thought that,' said Margaret, with her soft smile; 'and I would be very glad to have your advice. I'm troubled about Jamie's education. Isabel is young; she'll maybe not think as I do. I am very anxious for your advice.'

'We were talking of different things,' said Mr. Lothian, leading the invalid into the house. 'We were discussing what has happened in the country-side. If anybody can convince Miss Catherine it is you, Margaret. She will not believe the story everybody is full of—though I saw Ailie with my own eyes, one day helpless on her bed, the next walking down the hill-side far more strongly, my poor child, than you.'

'It was hysterical; nothing will make me believe different,' said Miss Catherine; 'fanciful illness, fanciful cure. I'm not gainsaying the facts, but you'll never get me to believe it was miraculous. What is Ailie Macfarlane that God should do miracles for her? If it had been Margaret here—'

'But He knows I want no miracles,' said Margaret; 'I'm very content with what I get. I'm fond of both the bairns myself; but I give most to little Mary; not that she deserves it most, or that I like her best, but because

her nature's ay craving. It's the same thing. Ailie craves, too, and God knows the nature He gave her; but for me—He sees I'm content.'

'And you would be content if you were cut in little pieces for Isabel and Jean Campbell's weans,' cried Miss Catherine, with an indignation that was assumed to hide something else. 'It takes little to content you.'

'Everybody is so good to me,' said Margaret. 'You are not so good to Ailie Macfarlane. You take up her little words, and you're angry at God for doing more for her than for me; but I take it as a compliment, for my part,' said the girl, with a smile. She was so near her Father in Heaven, that she spoke of Him almost as she would have done of a father on earth.

'Well—well,' said Miss Catherine, impatiently, 'we must all believe just what you like to tell us. Where is Isabel? I think she might be here to look after you and keep you comfortable instead of wandering all the day among the hills.'

'She is never away from me,' said Margaret, warmly; 'she would carry me in her arms if I would let her. I sent her out for change, poor Bell! It would be a hard thing if I was to let her put all her happiness on me.'

'Better on you than on that English lad,' said Miss Catherine, with heat, 'that nobody knows. In my day, we were never allowed to speak to a young man till his kith and kin were known. You think you're wiser now—but I wish it may come to no harm,' said the old lady. She was an old woman given to opposition, but the strength of her indignation now lay in the absolute necessity she felt to do or say something which should not drop into weak lamentation and tears.

Margaret made no answer. She bent back in her invalid chair, and threw off the shawl which wrapped her, and untied the bonnet which surrounded her delicate face like a great projecting frame. As for the minister, his face flushed, and his hands grew restless with agitation; though on the surface of things it would have seemed that he had very little to do with the matter.

'There is no meaning in it,' said Mr. Lothian; 'they're children both; she is not the one, especially now—No, you need not think of that.'

And with this speech he rose up and went to the window, and gazed out, not knowing what to say. Miss Catherine held up her hands commenting on his excitement as women do—half contemptuous, half amused—

'What is it to him that might be her father?' she said, leaning over Margaret, in a whisper. And Margaret smiled with the indulgent quiet of old age.

'Let them be,' she said, softly; 'God will guide it

His own way. I'm not afraid for my Isabel. When I'm away you'll see what is in her. My shadow is ay coming in, though you don't think it, between her and you.'

At this moment the minister turned round, as with a little impatience, and interrupted the side-talk.

'And as we speak of her, here comes Isabel,' he said, with a hasty sigh. Both the women knew at once more distinctly than if he had said it, that the 'English lad,' young Stapylton, the one idler of the country-side, was with Isabel. As the young pair approached, the elder visitors prepared to go away. Miss Catherine was absorbed in her anxiety and grief for Margaret, but other feelings stirred in the mind of her companion. He was eager to leave the cottage before Isabel and her escort should appear, and hurried the old lady in her leave-taking.

'We must not tire her out,' he said, pressing Margaret's hand with a certain petulant haste, which she forgave him. It was true he was old enough to be Isabel's father; but even that reflection, though he had often insisted upon it in his own thoughts, had not moved him as it ought to have done. He could not wait to meet her, but nodded his head with a poor assumption of carelessness, and hurried Miss Catherine down the opposite path. Even Mr. Lothian's secret sentiments had been discovered, like other things, by the country-side; and the old lady perceived what he meant, and dried the tear in her eye, and looked at him with a certain grim, half-pitying smile about the corner of her mouth.

'Isabel will think we are angry,' she said, watching him with a certain interest—almost amusement in his suffering; 'though, poor thing, I don't know that she is to blame.'

'Miss Catherine, you forget that an innocent girl should not be spoken of so,' said the minister, with a heavy sigh.

'I forget nothing, Edward Lothian—nor that you, like an old fool, are breaking your heart about her; a girl that might be your daughter—a mere silly bairn!'

'Hush!' he said. A faint colour had crept upon his face. He made no attempt to deny the accusation. 'I hope I am not a man to break my heart, as you say, for anything in the world,' he added, after a pause, 'as long as there is the parish, and my work;' and the poor man unconsciously once more rounded his sentence with a sigh.

CHAPTER II

It was almost twilight when Isabel and Horace Stapylton entered the little parlour where Margaret lay back wearily in her chair, longing for rest and the silence of the night; but she smiled softly at her sister, and half rose from her seat, weak, but courteous to acknowledge the presence of the stranger. Stapylton was the son of an English squire, who had been sent to Scotland to study agriculture, and from the high farming of Lothian had found his way to Ayrshire on the score of cheesemaking, and thence to the other side of the Loch to Mr. Smeaton's great stock farm. It had been autumn when he came, and the grouse was a still more potent attraction. And after a while he had found his way over the braes to see Mr. Lothian, who had once been tutor to the young earl (before he came to be marquis), and had many English friends. A Scotch Manse is the home of hospitality, and young Stapylton found himself comfortable and saw Isabel, and discovered many attractions in the place; and, after a succession of flying visits, had settled down as Mr. Lothian's permanent guest. In the primitive world of Loch Diarmid he was distinguished by his nationality, which placed him on a little pedestal apart from all competitors. He was 'yon English lad' to the prejudiced multitude; and more kindly bystanders entitled him 'the young Englishman at the Manse.' He was a ruddy, well-looking, not highly refined type of man; but he was a stranger and 'English,' and surrounded with a certain agreeable half-mystery in consequence. His accent had a sound of refinement and elevation in it to ears used to the broader vowels and 'West-country drawl' of the vernacular. And to Isabel Diarmid he had a charm more subtle even than the attraction of singularity and unlikeness to the multitude. He was the first man who had openly and evidently owned her power as a woman, which of itself is a great matter. It did not matter where she went, he knew of it as by magic, and was always at hand, a kind of persecution which is not always disagreeable to an inexperienced girl. It gave to Isabel that vague, sweet sense of being one of the princesses of romance which tells for so much in a young life. She went in now, to her sister, with life breathing about her, with the wild perfume of the summer blossoms, the heather she had been brushing against, the bog-myrtle she had been treading under foot, like an atmosphere round her; and love untold and hope without bounds, all tender, vague, and splendid, encir-

cling her like the air she breathed. This was the difference between the two sisters, and it was a strange difference. If Margaret had been an ordinary invalid it would have been a touching and melancholy contrast. But as it was the advantage was not all on her sister's side.

'We've been hearing of Ailie Macfarlane,' said Isabel, eagerly; 'I have seen her. If it is faith that has cured Ailie, why should you lie there so weak? Oh, my bonnie Maggie! If it was the like of me it would be different; but why should Ailie be well and strong and you lie there?'

'I think because it's God's will,' said Margaret: 'but Miss Catherine has been here, and I have done nothing this hour but talk of myself; it is not the best subject. Mr. Stapylton, I thought you were leaving the Loch? There is not much to take up a young man like you here.'

'There is more here than anywhere else in the world,' said young Stapylton; 'I should like to stay all my life—I hate the very thought of going away.'

'But your friends are all in England,' said Margaret, 'and your life—it is not easy for me now to feel what life is. I am like one lying by a riverside, seeing it glide and glide away. I can do little but speak, and that's poor work. But you that are young and strong are different—you and Isabel. You should not put off each other's time.'

'We met by chance,' said Isabel, with a sudden blush; 'and I have done all I had to do. There are times when one cannot work; it's gloaming now and the day is past. There is a meeting down at the Lochhead with Mr. Lothian and all the ministers. But I would rather stay with you. *She's* coming in from the Lochhead, and the bairns are ready for their supper—and, Margaret, we've wearied you.'

She was Jean Campbell, the stepmother to whom Isabel was less kind and tolerant than her sister, and whom presently they heard come in with a little commotion into the large low kitchen where the family took its meals. Little Mary had been with her mother, and by and by a little knock at the parlour-door announced her approach. The lady-visitors were very great people to the child, and only she of 'the other family' ever ventured uninvited into that splendid apartment. She was like Isabel, though Isabel was indignant to be told so—with two large excitable, brilliant brown eyes, which at this moment blazed out of the little flushed and agitated face. She had been at the meeting, and had heard all, and felt all, with precocious sensibility. While Isabel went out under pretence of helping her step-

mother, but in reality to accompany her visitor to the door, the child knelt down on the stool she had been sitting on by Margaret's side, and began her little passionate tale.

'It was like in the Bible,' said little Mary; 'in the middle of the reading the Holy Spirit came. O Margaret, I couldn't bear it! Ailie gave a great cry, and then she spoke; but it wasna *her* that spoke: her countenance was shining white, like the light—just like the Bible; and she spoke out like a minister, but far better than the minister. It was awfu' to hear her; and, O Margaret, I couldn't bear it; I thought shame.'

'Why did you think shame?' said Margaret. 'You should have been glad to hear, thankful to hear—even if it was too high for a bairn like you to understand.'

'It wasna that,' cried the child. 'I thought shame that it wasna you. Why can Ailie do it, and no you? And they say you are as good as Ailie, and as holy; but they say you havena faith. O Margaret, would you let *her* ay be the first, and a' the folk going after her? I canna bear it! I have faith mysel. You could get up this minute, and go and speak like Ailie, if you would but have faith.'

Margaret put her arm softly round the excited child, and the little thing's agitation found vent in tears. She put down her head on her sister's shoulder, and sobbed with childish mortification and wounded pride. Whether any echo of that cry woke in the patient soul thus strangely reproached, the angels only know. Margaret said nothing for some minutes; she held the child close with her feeble arm, and calmed and soothed her; and it was only when the sobs were over and the excitement subdued that she spoke.

'So you think God's no so kind to me?' she said softly in the darkness. 'My little Mary, you are too little to understand. I am not one that craves for gifts; I am content with love. I am best pleased as it is. Ailie and me are two different spirits; not that one is better and the other worse. If we had both been angels, we would still have been different. You are too little to understand. I am not the one to speak and to work; I am the one to be content.'

'But you shouldna be content,' said little Mary; 'you should have faith. O Margaret, I'm little, but I've faith. Rise up, and be well and live! They a' say that to be ill and die is a sin against the Holy Ghost.'

The child had risen up in her excitement, and stood stretching out her little arms over her sister. The room was dark and still, with but the 'glimmering square' of the window fully visible, and night gathering in all the

corners. Margaret's form was invisible in the soft gloom; the outline of her reclining figure, the little phantom standing over her, the suggestion of a contrast, intense as anything in life, was all that could have been divined by any spectator. Presently soft hands stretched upwards, and took hold of the little rigid arms of the would-be marvel-worker; and a voice still softer—low like the coo of a dove, came out of the darkness.

Margaret attempted no reply; she made no remonstrance; she only repeated that psalm which is as the voice of its mother to every Scottish child—the first thing learnt, the last forgotten:—

‘The Lord’s my Shepherd, I’ll not want,
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green; He leadeth me
The quiet waters by.

Yea, though I walk in death’s dark vale,
Yet will I fear none ill;
For Thou art with me, and Thy rod
And staff me comfort still.’

As the soft familiar voice went on, poor little Mary’s excited nerves broke down. She burst once more into tears, and ere the psalm was ended added her small faltering voice to the low and steady tones of her sister. She was overcome by influences much too exciting to be understood by a child. The little creature yielded, because her physical endurance was not equal to the task she had set herself, but her mind was unchanged. She was impatient, angry, and mortified. Her sister’s rival had triumphed, and little Mary could not bear it. As for Margaret, she rose when her psalm was ended, and took her little sister’s hand and led her into the kitchen, where the family table was prepared. Margaret sat down in the cushioned chair which awaited her, still holding little Mary by the hand. She had to pause to take breath before she spoke, and the child stood by her like an eager little prisoner, with her big eyes shining. Mary’s mind was precocious, and stimulated into premature action by the strange circumstances that surrounded her. She felt as profoundly as if she had been twenty, that while Margaret and Isabel were the Miss Diarmids, she was only ‘Jean Campbell’s bairn;’ and now a sure way of obtaining individual distinction, the highest of all grades of rank, had burst upon the child; therefore she was in no mood for the half-reproof which she foresaw was to come.

‘I think little Mary is too young for the meetings,’ said Margaret; ‘not that I mean she should not learn;

but she is very quick and easy moved, and she is but a bairn.'

The stepmother looked up with a little flash of not unnatural suspicion.

'She is no a lady born like you,' said Jean, hastily; 'but in my way of thinking that's a reason the more why she should learn.'

'But no when she is so young,' said Margaret. 'Her little face is all moving, and the bairn herself trembling. It's her nerves I'm thinking of,' said the sick girl, with a deprecating smile; at which, however, Jean only shook her head, as she looked at the child's glowing, startled face.

'Nerves! I never heard of nerves in her kith or kin,' said the woman; and then added, 'You may speak to Isabel about nerves, Margaret; she's been greeting about the house like an infant, and tells me "naething," when I asks what ails her. It's to her you should speak.'

Margaret looked at her sister across the table, and shook her head. 'You all take your own way,' she said, with a touch of sadness, 'though you say it is to please me. I am thankful beyond measure that you care for the kirk and for prayer, but little Mary might be as well if she was left with me. We are great friends. And, Isabel, you'll make your bonnie eyes red, but you'll no give up a hard thought or a hasty word; and yet that would be worth more than miracles. Jamie, come and tell me what has happened to-day on the hill.'

'Me!' said Jamie, looking up with his mouth full of porridge, and his eyes large with wonder. 'There's never naething happens till me.'

'Is that a way to answer when Margaret speaks to you?' cried his mother. 'But he'll never learn manners—never, whatever you do. I think whiles he's no better than a natural born.'

'But he knows every creature on the hill, and every bird on the trees,' said Margaret, 'and is never cruel to one of them. That's grand manners. He's good to everything God has made. Jamie, did you see the minister to-day?'

'Hunting flowers on the hill,' said Jamie promptly, thrusting away his thick matted white hair from his round, staring, wondering eyes.

'So many great things going on at his very side, and him gathering a wheen useless flowers! And it was well seen on him,' she cried; 'there was Mr. Fraser of the Langholm and Mr. Wood on the other side of the hill, that took it a' upon themselves; though Ailie's in our parish, and a' the stir. And our ain minister without a word to say! I've ay said he was ower much taken up

with his flowers, and his fancies; no, but what I think it would be a far better thing for Isabel——'

'Nothing about me, if you please,' said Isabel, flashing into sudden wrath; and then she gave Margaret a guilty look. As for Margaret she but shook her head softly once more.

'He is not so sure in his own mind,' she said 'that is what makes him silent. Mr. Wood and Mr. Fraser are different kind of men. Some can just believe without more ado, and some have to think first. Isabel, if you're ready, it is the bairns' bedtime, and we can go.'

'You're awfu' anxious to-night about the bairns,' said Jean, still irritable and displeased.

'She is so little,' said Margaret, stooping over little Mary to kiss her. 'If you would but believe me, and no take her down yonder. How can she understand at her age? and she has nerves as well as Isabel. Will you promise me not to think to-night? but just to fall asleep, little Mary, as soon as you've said your prayers?'

'I'll pray for you, Margaret,' cried the child, with the tremulous tones of excitement, 'and you'll, maybe, be well and strong like Ailie the morn's morn.'

'Then wait till morning comes,' said Margaret, 'for to-night I am wearied, and I want to rest.'

Thus they separated, the sisters with their candles retiring to their little parlour—the lights in the window of which were watched by more than one watcher from far, with tender thoughts of the young inmates. But Margaret was weary—too weary—for the counsel she had to give. She went to bed leaving Isabel, the latest of all the house, sitting alone, in a fever of thought which she could now indulge for the first time. The lonely little window sent a feeble ray upon the hill-side road, and was visible on the Loch to such a late hour as seldom witnessed any window alight in Loch Diarmid. There were many causes for the tumult of fancies which absorbed the girl and made her forget the progress of time. The very air around her was full of excitement; her sister for anything she knew might the next day rise healed from her bed. She herself might be free as the winds to choose her own life; and it was at the very climax and crisis of this life that Isabel stood.

CHAPTER III

It will have been guessed by what has been already said that one of the periodical fits of religious excitement to which every primitive country is liable, had lately taken

place in the parish of Loch Diarmid. There had been a general quickening of popular interest in religious matters. Religion had taken a new meaning to the fervid primitive mind. A miraculous world, all glowing with undeveloped forces, rose up around them. The end might be that the Lord would come, bringing confusion to His enemies and triumph to His people, or, at least, that such supernatural endowments would come as should make poor men and peasant maidens the reformers of the world. At the first outset there was something splendid, something exalting, in this hope. And the strange story which a short time before had run round the Loch as by magic gave it instant confirmation. Ailie Macfarlane, a young woman known to be hopelessly ill, who had been visited, and sympathised with, and ministered to by all the kindly gossips of the parish—whose parents had been consoled with on her approaching loss—and whose symptoms were as well known to the community as their several and individual sufferings, had risen up all at once from her sick bed and gone out on a journey at the call of faith. The astonished parish had suddenly encountered her afoot upon its public roads, yet knew with a certainty beyond all power of deception, that the day before she had been a helpless sufferer.

Such a wonder had an immense effect upon the popular mind, as indeed a thoroughly ascertained fact of the kind would have had anywhere. Whether or not she might turn out a prophetess, as she claimed to be, this wonderful preliminary was certain. She had risen up and walked like the paralytic in the Gospel, in defiance of all physicians and human means of cure, and was visible among them in restored health and activity a creature who had been on the verge of the grave. Throughout the whole country, great and small, without exception, were occupied by Ailie Macfarlane's wonderful recovery. Nobody could deny, and nobody could explain it.

The thrill of strange expectation which thus ran through the parish was, as may be supposed, more strongly felt by Margaret's friends than by any other of the rustic neighbours. The strength of their love for her tempted them almost to accuse, and certainly to reproach, the wilful sufferer who would not avail herself of her known favour with Heaven and be healed like the other. It was this certainty that set her sister free (or at least, so she thought,) to entertain visions of happiness to herself independent of Margaret. On the very next evening, when the sun had set upon the loch, but still lingered red upon the further hills, Isabel resumed the subject which had occupied her thoughts. Could she do it?

Sunder her future life from her past at a leap—set herself free from all the present claims upon her—could it be possible to do it? or, on the other hand, would she, could she give up her love?

Isabel's brain had grown giddy by dint of thinking, when suddenly she heard a little gravel thrown on the corner of the parlour window—the signal that she was waited for without. She threw her shawl round her hastily, drawing it over her head, and stole out. Margaret was not there to be disturbed. She had gone to her place of prayer some time before, and was still in that silent nook, with the sweet rowan-tree blossoms scenting the air round her. Isabel stole out with a certain guilty sense that her errand was not one to be approved by any beholder. Some way up, beyond the cottage, among the great bushes of whims and heather, lingered a single figure. Few passengers cared to wade among that thick undergrowth; here and there it was treacherous moss in which the foot sank; here and there a young birch waved its brown locks pathetically in the evening breeze; and the heather-bushes, with their gnarled stalks like miniature oaks, were not very pleasant to walk among. But the two who had appointed their meeting there did not care for the heather stalks, or the trembling moss. They were thinking but of themselves—or, rather, as they would have said, of each other.

'Have you thought it all over?' said the young man, eagerly. 'Isabel, you cannot mean to cast me off. Don't tell me so; don't look as if you could be so cruel. I could bear anything for your sake, but that I could not bear.'

This was said in haste and excitement, after a long pause; for Isabel had nothing to say to her lover, but went on with him in silence, turning her face away from his anxious looks.

'I never thought of casting you off,' said Isabel; 'how could that be? If we were to be parted for ever and ever, I could never cast you off; but I canna do it, Horace—I canna do it. You must ask me no more.'

'Why cannot you do it?' he said. 'What is to prevent you? I have told you everything, Isabel. They will say I am too young to marry if I ask them at home—and they don't know you. If my mother knew my Isabel, it would be different. And if we were but married, it would be different. Once married, everything would come right. And what matter is it if we were married in private or in public? It is always in a house here in Scotland. I only ask that one little sacrifice. Is it much to ask when I am ready to do anything—everything—'

'But there is nothing for you to do,' said Isabel; 'it

would all be me. You are making me deceive them now. I never said what was not true all my life before; and now I'm false to everybody—everybody but you.'

'It would put an end to that if you would do what I say,' cried the young man. 'We should go away; and then when we came back, everybody would know. I am asking so little—only to have it done privately. We would come back, and all would be right. My people would make up their minds to it when they could not help it; and yours——'

'Ah!' cried Isabel, 'to speak to me of running away and being married, and my Margaret—my only sister, lying dying! How can you name such a thing to me?'

'Now, Isabel,' said young Stapylton, 'this is nonsense, you know. If you break my heart, what good will that do to her? It will not cure her. Besides,' he added with suppressed scorn, 'you know yourself—you have told me—that Margaret might be well if she liked. She is very good, isn't she? better than that girl whom you are all talking of—and she ought to be cured. If she keeps herself ill on purpose, it is cruel and selfish of her. Why should she spoil your life and her own too?'

'How dare you speak like that of my sister?' said Isabel, with blazing eyes, 'and her so near the angels? Oh, Horace, you would never think *so* of Margaret if you were really, really caring for me.'

'If you can doubt me, I have no more to say,' said the young man; and then they started apart, and the briefest lovers' quarrel ensued—a quarrel soon made up in the inevitable, universal way, strengthening the position of the one who attacked, and weakening that of the defender. Stapylton drew Isabel's hand through his arm when she gave it him in reconciliation and led her through the heather farther and farther from home. 'You are never to utter such cruel words any more,' he said, 'nor so much as to think them. Am not I ready to give up everything for you? The old Hall, and my father's favour, and all I might have if I pleased. It is different from Loch Diarmid, Isabel; but I care for nothing but you; and you will not make the least little sacrifice for me.'

'I would make any sacrifice—any sacrifice; there is nothing so hard but I would try to do it—for you, Horace,' said the girl with tears.

'And yet you will not come away with me for two or three days, and be made my wife! What are you afraid of, Isabel? Can you not trust me? Do you think I would harm you? Tell me what it is you fear?'

'Fear!' said Isabel surprised, lifting her eyes to his face. 'When you are with me what can I fear?'

'Then why don't you trust me?' said the young fellow, with a sudden flush on his face.

'I trust you as I trust myself,' said Isabel. 'Could I care for anyone as I care for you, and not trust him? It is my own folk I am thinking of. I cannot deceive my own folk. Oh, dinna ask me, Horace, and I will do anything else in the world.'

'Your own folk!' said Horace, with a little contempt; 'Jean Campbell, perhaps, that is not good enough to be your housekeeper. I am deceiving father and mother for you, Isabel, and I never grumble. To think of your father's widow in comparison with me!'

'I think of Margaret,' said Isabel, 'my twin sister. Oh, never ask me more! It would kill my Margaret. Me to deceive her that has been part of herself. Oh, Horace, dinna ask me! I would die to please you; but not even to please you, would I hurt her. I canna do it. I would sooner die!'

Young Stapylton's face grew red all over with a passionate, furious colour: then he drew his breath hard and restrained himself. For one moment he grasped Isabel's hand, which rested on his arm, with a firm pressure, which would have made her scream had she been less startled. Then he loosed it with a strange little laugh which was not pleasant to hear.

'Isabel,' he said, 'if you don't make me hate Margaret before all's over, it will be a wonder. Do you forget what you have told me? or do you think I forget? Would I ever ask you to leave your sister, if things were here just as they are in other places? Have you not told me that the age of miracles has come back; and don't I know that there is nobody in the place so good as Margaret? Why should she die when the rest recover? It stands to reason; and you are not going to spend all your lives together, you two. Of course you will marry some time: and so will she—when she is better,' the young man added after a pause.

'Margaret marry? Never, never!' cried Isabel. 'You cannot understand; and you dinna say that as if you believed it either—but like a scoffer,' she added, 'that thinks nothing is true.'

'I think my Isabel is true,' said the young man, 'and I believe anything she says.'

'Oh, no me, no me,' cried Isabel, with tears, 'dinna call *me* true. I am false to everybody belonging to me. I am cheating and deceiving all my own folk. I am true to nobody but you.'

'After all, that is the most important,' said Stapylton, with an attempt at playfulness. 'Isabel, am not I the

first now? the first to be loved—the first to be considered? I know you are to me.'

Isabel made a long pause. She wandered on with him, for they were walking all the time, with her eyes bent on the sweet grass she trod under foot and the heather-bushes among which they picked their way. After a long interval a 'No' dropped from her lips. 'No,' she went on, shaking her head slowly. 'I must not think of you first—not now. I must think of Margaret first. Dinna be angry, Horace. It is but a year since I saw you first, and she has been my best friend and my dearest for twenty years. And you are well and strong, and she is dying; and you have plenty of friends, and she has no one but me. I must think of her before you.'

'Then you don't love me!' cried the young man. 'I see how it is: you have a liking for me—that is all. You are pleased to keep a man dangling about at your orders, waiting for you, as they say here, at kirk and market; but as for *loving*—giving up all and following your husband—you're not the girl for that, Isabel. I see: you're Scotch, and you're cautious; and you won't take one step till you see what is to be the next; and as for speaking of love——'

Isabel looked up at him nastily with indignant, tender eyes, wounded to the heart. She drew her hand out from his arm. Not love him, and yet deceive her friends for him and leave Margaret alone the long, slow evening through! The colour rose violent and hot to her face. But she was very proud as well as very warm in her affections. She would not explain. Turning away from him as she disengaged her hand, her eye suddenly caught the dreary blank of the moor around them, from which the light had faded. Never before in all their rambles had they wandered so far. The cottage was invisible, as well as every other habitation. The night was falling. It was time already for the family supper, and Margaret, all alone, would be waiting for her sister, while Isabel was far from home, in the dark on the moor, with only her lover beside her. A little cry of consternation burst from the girl's lips. Had she had wings, she could scarcely have gone back quick enough to save Margaret from anxiety and wonder, and perhaps fear. Her companion saw her start, her painful surprise, and forgot his upbraiding. He seized her hand again suddenly, and drew it almost with a degree of force within his arm.

'Isabel,' he cried energetically, 'it's night, and nobody will see us; and we are as near to Loch Goil as we are to the Glebe—I think nearer, Isabel. It's but to go on, now you are so far on your way. There shall be nothing

to worry, nothing to frighten you. Let us go down on the other side, and get it over. It is not a great matter, if you love me. Margaret will be anxious, but we'll send her word to-morrow. I know a good woman to take you to. I know a quiet way down, where nobody will see us. Isabel, Isabel! you don't mean to say you're angry. You are not afraid of me?'

'I'm feared for no man,' cried Isabel, drawing herself away from him, and turning back with startled, gleaming eyes. She made no further answer, but folded her shawl close round her, and turned her back upon her eager, pleading lover. He had to follow her as she made her way with nervous haste back to the highroad which crossed the hill. Even then he did not think his cause lost. The night was growing dark, and he had brought her far from home, and the road led both ways. He went after her, entreating, praying, using every art he knew.

'They will be anxious now as they can be,' he said; 'they will think we have gone; they will be better pleased to see you come back to-morrow my wife than to have all the parish telling that you and I were here so long on the hill. Isabel, it will be all to do over again, anxiety and everything. The worst is over. Come; an hour's walk will bring us to Loch Goil.'

He put his hand on her arm as he spoke. They were on the verge of the highroad, which by this time was scarcely distinguishable from the moor. He had followed closely across the heather, as she sped along, keeping by her side, urging his anxious arguments. Now, for the first time, he put out his hand, drawing her closer to him, drawing her the other way, on the downward path which led to another life. Isabel snatched herself away and stood facing him for a moment. It was a moment of breathless suspense to both. He knew her so little that he believed she might still decide for him; and held his breath in expectation: while the indignant, proud, tender creature stood looking at him, uncertain whether she should part with him for ever, or throw herself into his arms in a momentary storm of love and upbraiding, making him understand at once and for ever the possibilities and impossibilities in her nature. She stood lingering for that moment of doubt—and then she turned suddenly from him without a word, and drew her shawl over her head and fled homewards like a deer or a child of the hills. While he stood still in consternation he heard her rapid feet scattering the pebbles on the road, going as fast as a mountain-stream. The young man made a plunge after her; but she was already far in advance, and had known the path all her life,

and there was neither credit nor advantage in pursuing a runaway maiden. He came to a dead pause and ground his teeth in vexation and disappointment. He was passionately 'in love' with the girl, and yet he called her names in the bitterness of his mortified feelings. 'I'll have her yet, all the same, whether she will or no,' he said with fury, as he found himself thus left in the lurch. As for Isabel, she took no time to think. She knew every step of the road along which she rushed in the darkness. Her heart was hot and burned within her; if it was anger, if it was excitement, if it was misery, she had no time to decide. The only thing before her was to get home. If she could but reach home, and find Margaret tranquil, as was her wont, then the whole matter should be ended for ever. This was what Isabel was thinking, so far as she could be said to think at all.

When she came at last within sight of the dim light in the kitchen window, a low lattice, out of which the lamp was faintly shining like a glowworm on the ground, Isabel's flying pace was quickened. She could distinguish already some vague outlines of more than one figure round the door. Had the occasion or her feelings been less urgent, she would have paused to recover her breath, to put back her shawl, and end her precipitate course with an attempt at decorum; but she was too much agitated now to think of any such precautions. They heard her rapid feet as she began to hear the soft sound of their voices in the summer gloom; and Jean Campbell had but time to call out 'Who goes there? is it oor Isabel?'—when the girl rushed into the midst of them, breathless, her hair ruffled by the shawl, her face glowing with the unusual exercise, her eyes shining. She rushed into the midst of the little group, catching hold of her stepmother in her agitation to stop herself in her headlong course. And the watchers started and gave place to her with a mixture of joy and terror.

'Lassie, you'll have me down!' cried Jean Campbell, staggering under the sudden clutch, 'but it's you, God be praised. Here's your sister half out of her mind. And where have you been?'

'Is Margaret there?' cried the panting Isabel. 'And it so late, and the dew falling—and all my fault! But I did not mean it—I never thought it was so late; and then we got astray on the hill; and I've run every step of the way,' cried Isabel hastily.

'And what were you doing on the hill?' began the stepmother. Margaret interrupted the expostulation. She put her hand out in the darkness to her sister. 'I am not able to stand longer—now Isabel's come,' she

said; 'I am wearied and faint with waiting—say nothing to-night—the morn will be a new day.'

'Aye,' said Jean Campbell to herself, when the sisters had gone in; 'the morn's ay a new day; but them that's lightheaded and thoughtless the night will be thoughtless the morn. Naething is to be counted on with a young lass. She'll hae her fling though she's a lady born. And Margaret there, puir thing, that never kent what it was to have the life dancing in her bits of veins! I'm, maybe, hard on her mysel,' Jean murmured, pausing a moment at the closed door of the parlour. There was a sound of weeping from within, which touched her heart. She listened, hesitating whether to interfere. 'If she had twa-three words to say to her lad on the hill, there was nae harm in that,' said Jean to herself; and moved by recollections, she knocked at the door. 'Lasses, ten's chappit,' she said. 'The bairns are in their beds, and Margaret should ay be bedded as soon as the bairns. As for *her* there, likely she meant nae harm. Let her gang to her bed and say her prayers, and we'll think on't nae mair.'

'I hope my own sister may say what she likes,' said Isabel, starting up and turning on the good-natured mediator with her bright eyes full of tears. 'There is nobody has a right to meddle between Margaret and me.'

'Oh, hush, hush,' said Margaret, 'you two. I am not finding fault with her—and she is not ungrateful to you. It is a thing will never happen again.'

'No—till the next time,' said Jean Campbell, closing the parlour door after her with rising irritation. 'Am I a fool to mind what the silly thing says?' she said to herself, as she fastened the cottage door. Just then the sound of another foot scattering the gravel on the road came to her ear. With natural curiosity she reopened the door, leaving a little chink by which she could see through. 'I kent it was him,' she said triumphantly within herself. Though it was so dark, there was something about young Stapylton's appearance, as a stranger and foreigner, which was instantly distinguishable to rural eyes. Jean looked on with keen curiosity as he passed. He could not see her, nor could he perceive the loophole through which her eyes watched him. To him the house was all dark and silent, shut up in its usual tranquillity. He paused before it, and inspected it all round, evidently with the idea that Isabel might be lingering outside. When he saw the light in the parlour window, he turned away with an exclamation of disgust, and shook his fist at the house which contained his love. The astonished watcher could not hear

what he muttered to himself, nor divine what was the cause of his wrath; but she threw the door open, and shook her fist at him in return, with prompt resentment. 'It's a dark night for a long walk, Maister Stapylton,' Jean called out to him, with fierce satisfaction; 'and there's an awfu' ill bit down there where the burn's broke the bank. Can I len' you a lantern till you're past the burn?'

The young man quickened his steps, and went rambling on detaching the stones down the rugged road with some inarticulate angry answer of which Jean could make nothing. The disappointed wooer was in no very good humour either with himself or the household, which he pictured to himself must be laughing over his failure. Jean, for her part, put up the bolt with demonstration when she had thus gratified her feelings. The 'lad' whom his lass had left disconsolate on the hill, was fair game in the eyes of the peasant woman, and the little matter was concluded when he was thus sent angry and humbled away.

But it was not so in the parlour where Isabel was telling her story with many tears. Margaret, whose mind had long been abstracted from all such thoughts, listened with a curious mingling of interest and pain. That it could ever have entered into the mind of her sister to leave her thus suddenly, without warning, was an idea that filled her with consternation. She was silent while the confession was being made, confused as if a new world had suddenly opened up before her. Not a word of reproof did Margaret say; but she listened like a creature in a dream. Love!—was it love that could work so, that could be so pitiless? The virgin soul awoke appalled, and looked out as upon a new earth. Even Isabel did not know the effect her words produced. Her penitence fell altogether short of the occasion. She was sorry for having listened, sorry for having given patient ear for a moment to such a project, but she was not utterly bewildered, like Margaret, to think that such a project could be.

'And he thought, and I thought,' cried Isabel, alarmed by her sister's silence, 'that you could never be long left when Ailie's cured and well. He would never have dreamed of it, but that he believed, like me——. Oh, Margaret! it's slow to come, but it's coming, you're sure it's coming? God would never forsake *you*.'

'He will never forsake me,' cried Margaret; 'but, Bell, I cannot be cured. That is not the Lord's meaning for me. And if I had been well, you would have run away and left me!' she added, with a little natural pang. Isabel could not encounter the wistful reproach in her

eyes; she threw herself down by her sister's side, and hid her face in Margaret's dress.

'If you had been well, you would not have minded,' she sobbed: 'if you had been well, somebody would have been coming for *you* as well as for me.'

'For me!' said the sick girl—her voice was too soft for indignation, too soft for reproach. 'Yes,' she said; after a pause, 'the Bridegroom is soon coming for me; I hear His step nearer and nearer every day. And, Bell, I will not say a word. It is nature, they all tell me; I am not blaming you.'

'If you would blame me, if you would but be wild at me!' cried Isabel, weeping, 'it wouldna be so hard to bear.'

Margaret bent down over the prostrate creature; she put her arms round the pretty head, with all its brown locks disordered, and pressed her own soft, faintly coloured cheek upon it, 'It is but God that knows us all, to the bottom of our hearts,' she said, 'and He is always the kindest. We are all hard upon our neighbours, every one—even me that should know better and am ay talking. But, Bell, it cannot be well for him to tempt you; you should listen to him no more.'

'I will never, never speak to him again!' cried Isabel.

'No that—not so much as that,' said Margaret; 'but he should not tempt my Bell to what is not true.'

And then the penitent girl felt her sister's kiss on her forehead, and knew herself forgiven, and her fault passed over. She rose grateful and relieved, and the weight floated off her mind. The only one with whom the incident of the evening left any sting was the one who had most need of love's consolation—the sick girl who loved everybody, and whom even God cast into the background, leaving her in the shade. Poor Margaret went to her rest confused and stunned, not knowing what had befallen her. All were preferred to her, both by man and by God.

CHAPTER IV

NEXT morning the household in the Glebe Cottage found itself solaced and comforted from the excitement of the night. To Jean Campbell the incident was commonplace; 'No a thing to make a work about,' she acknowledged frankly; while even Isabel, except for a certain sense of excitement and giddiness as she settled down to ordinary things, comforted herself, like a child, that the matter was over, and that she should hear no more of it.

When Mr. Lothian paid her his usual afternoon visit, he found the sick girl, as usual, in her invalid chair, with her knitting in her hands. Isabel had left the room only as he became visible on the road, and her work lay in a little heap on the table. He cast a hasty look at it, even at the moment when he greeted the other sister. That evidence of an abrupt departure was of more consequence than it ought to have been to the minister. He shook his head as he sat down by the abandoned work.

'She need not have run away when she saw me coming,' he said, with a little sigh. 'I could have said nothing to anger her, here.'

'She did not mean it,' said Margaret. 'She is hasty, like a bairn. I am afraid sometimes I have made too much a bairn of her. I have grown so old myself, and she is so bonnie and young.'

'Too bonnie and young,' said the poor minister; and then he roused himself to a sense of justice; 'but not younger—nor bonnier either for that matter—than you, my poor Margaret. It is your illness that makes you feel a difference. I remember two years ago——'

'I would rather forget that,' said Margaret, with a faint blush. 'It is not illness, but death, that makes the difference, and sometimes I wonder what will become of her when I'm gone. I feel as if I should always want to take care of Bell, even in Heaven.'

'It may be so permitted for aught we know,' said Mr. Lothian.

He put out his hand, and took her wasted hand into his. The first fret that had crossed it for years was on poor Margaret's brow. To think of her sister as happy eventually, when her own grave was green, was sweet to the dying girl. But the conflict in Isabel's mind now, of happiness and self-sacrifice, was the hardest burden that had ever fallen on her delicate spirit. It seemed to introduce an alien note in the soft concords of the ending life.

'Yes, whether or no,' said Margaret, with a faint smile; 'and I wish you would preach to me now. I never get to the kirk with other folk. I am growing a law to myself, I fear, instead of minding the true law. Speak to me, for I'm wearied and cannot speak to myself.'

'It is you that have taught me many a day,' said the minister; and then he paused, and that pang of pity with which the strong sometimes look on the weak thrilled through him.

'Margaret,' he said, 'you know I cannot speak to you as many can; your sickness comes from the hand of

God, and you have never repined against Him. What comes from the clash and contradiction of human feelings is a different burden to bear. It seems a feature in our life that we must go against each other daily, whether we will or no. There is no happiness but has trouble in its train. What is joy to her is grief to you. What would be comfort to you, would sicken me and—aye, I will be just to him—one other, with disappointment and pain. The lassie that was married in the village yesterday made her mother's heart bleed; but her own would have suffered as sorely, and so would the lad's if she had not married. What can we say? It is not trouble of God's sending, but the complications of human nature. He looks down from Heaven and beholds and tries the children of men, as says the Scripture. It is the one that bears the heat and the cold, the long calm and the fierce tempest, that is Christ's soldier; but the cold and the heat, and the calm and the storm, are all natural—not punishments of God, but necessities of the world. We have to brace our minds up to them. It's a cross world, and its conditions must be borne—I do not say because God sends them of first purpose and will—but always for Christ's sake.'

In the silence that followed, and which Mr. Lothian made no attempt to disturb, sounds from without made themselves heard by degrees. There came an echo of steps on the road, and voices at the door. Margaret gave no heed, being absorbed in her own thoughts. But the minister, more used to the popular commotion, roused himself, and listened anxiously. Then there was a little parley outside. Mr. Lothian hurried out, to stay, if possible, the visit which he had foreseen. The group at the door was as great a contrast as could be imagined to the calm of the scene he had just left. Isabel stood, with flushed cheeks and clasped hands, before the parlour-door, half barring the entrance, half showing the way. Jean Campbell stood at the door of the kitchen, holding up her hands in excitement, and partial terror. 'Eh, if it could be—if it could but be!' she cried. 'Our Margaret, that was ay a child of God! Oh, Ailie woman, think weel before you disturb her. I'll no have her disturbed!—but if it was the will of God——'

'It's the will of God that brings me here,' said the young prophetess of Loch Diarmid. She was scarcely older than the patient to whom she came. She stood on the threshold of the house, in simple, ordinary dress a fair Lowland beauty, with abundant light locks, a delicate, half-hectic colour, and blue eyes *à fleur de*

tête, which, in her excitement, seemed absolutely to project from her face. They were the visionary, translucent eyes, not giving out, but absorbing, the light, which so often reveal the character of a mystic and enthusiast. She was no deceiver, it was evident, but believed in her own mission with a fervour which, to some degree, overcame the incredulity of every sympathetic spectator. She moved forward, with that strange directness which only primitive nature or passion ever shows, to the door of the room in which Margaret was. She took no notice of Isabel who stood in the way. 'It's in the name of the Lord,' said the inspired creature. Even the minister, who stood there ready to defend the repose of his friend against all comers, gave way before her with a strange thrill of something like faith. It might be—it was possible—God had employed such messengers before now. A creature spotless, and perfect, and young, in the first glow of love, and energy, and enthusiasm, could any human thing be nearer the angels? And the angels were God's messengers. Mr. Lothian stood back subdued—his own convictions and strong sense standing him in no stead against the excitement of the moment. Had he opposed her he would have felt guilty. He stood back against the wall and let her pass. 'If it is of God,' he said to himself. And she went in as Miriam might have gone with her timbrels—like a figure in a triumphant procession, going on to miracle and wonder in the name of the lord.

Behind her, however, came one who roused no such sentiments in the mind of the minister. This was a man evidently not of Ailie's rank, nor in any way resembling her, except in the flush of excitement which in him might have gone to any length of fanaticism. His mouth was closely shut; the lines of his face were rigid and strained; his eyes burned with a cloudy fire. Passion, which might almost be insanity, was in his look. The pair were as unlike as if one had been an errant angel astray from Heaven, and the other one of the rebels who fell from them with Lucifer. The minister started and grew red, and put up his hand to oppose the further progress of this unexpected visitor; although it was already very well known that 'Saul was among the prophets,' and 'Mr. John,' heretofore of a very different character, had entered their ranks.

'Mr. John, this is no place for you,' said Mr. Lothian. 'You have no need that I should tell you that. This is no place for you.'

'Wherever God's work is to be done is the place for me,' was the answer; and the speaker pressed on. He

was a powerful man, and a scuffle there might have been fatal to the dying girl; but yet the minister confronted him, and put his hand on his breast.

'It is not the work of God to disturb his dying saint,' said Mr. Lothian. 'She'll soon be free and in your way no longer. Let her go in peace.'

'Go?' cried Mr. John, 'dying?—never while God is faithful that promised. Stand back and let us in; it is to save her life.'

But it was not this or any more likely reason; it was simply to prevent the noise of contradiction and controversy from reaching Margaret, that Mr. Lothian yielded. He himself followed the stranger into the room, and Isabel crept after him. By this time the sun had set, and the daylight began to wane. Perhaps Margaret had guessed what the interruption meant. She was sitting as she had been when Mr. Lothian left her, with her hands crossed upon her breast, motionless, her eyes fixed upon the soft obscurity that gleamed in through the window. She turned her head half round as they all entered. 'Ailie, is it you?' she said. There was scarcely any surprise in her voice. 'I heard what had happened, and I knew you would be sure to come to me.'

Her perfect quiet, the composure of her attitude, the calm face gleaming like something cut in marble against the grey wall, had a certain effect even upon the young enthusiast. She made a pause ere she began, and her companion, who had been standing behind her, came round to her right hand, and gazed eagerly upon Margaret's face. The moment she saw him, Margaret, too, was disturbed in her composure; she started and gave a little cry and raised herself up in her chair; while, as for the intruder, he pressed forward upon her with eyes that burned in their deep sockets and an air of restrained passion, before which for the moment the fever of Ailie's inspiration sank into the shade.

'Has it come to this?' he said. 'And I was never told, never called to her! But, thanks be to God, we are still in time, and the prayer of faith will save——'

'Mr. John,' said Margaret, raising herself erect, 'this is no place for you. Why should you be told or called to me? If Ailie has anything to say I am content to hear her; but you and me are best apart.'

'Why should we be best apart,' cried Mr. John, 'when you know what my heart is? No, I will not go. Be silent all of you; how dare you interfere between her and me? I have come with one of God's handmaidens to save her life.'

'Let him be,' said Ailie. 'We've come here together that we may hold the Lord to his promise. Margaret

Diarmid, I've come to bid you rise up and be strong as I am. O woman! can you lie there and see the world lying in wickedness, and no find it in your heart to throw off the bonds of Satan? Why should ye lie and suffer there? It's no doctors you want, it's faith you want. We a' ken you're a child of God. Margret, hearken to me. I was like you, I was in my bed, worse than you, and pondered and pondered and kept silence till my heart burned. I said to mysel why was it? and the Lord taught me it was Satan and no His will. Do you think I lay there one day mair? I listened to the voice that was in my ears. I thought no more of flesh and blood; I rose up and here I am. Margret Diarmid, I command you to rise up in the name of the Lord!'

They all gathered close, with an uncontrollable thrill of excitement, to listen to this appeal and to see the result of it. Isabel fell on her knees beside her sister, and gazed at her to see the change, if any came. Ailie, with her hands raised over Margaret's head, and her face lifted to Heaven, waited for her answer. John Diarmid by her side, with a look of wilder passion still, hung over the group in speechless excitement. Even Jean Campbell behind stood wringing her hands, feeling her heart beat and her temples throb. Was it the Spirit of God that was about to come, shaking the homely room as by a whirlwind? There was a pause of awful stillness during which nobody spoke. When Margaret answered, the bystanders started and looked at each other. The calm tone of her voice fell upon their excited nerves like something from a different world.

'I hear *your* voice, Ailie,' said Margaret, with the softness of a whisper, though her words fell quite distinct and clear upon their ears, 'but I hear no voice within. Can you not believe that God may deal one way with you and another with me?'

'God has no stepbairns,' cried Ailie. 'Does He love me better than you? O neebors! on your knees—on your knees! Will He no remember His ain word that's passed to us and canna be recalled. What two or three agree to ask is granted afore we speak. It's no His consent, but her's we have to seek!'

Then she threw herself on her knees, with upturned face and hands stretched out. They all sank down around her, filling the darkening room with kneeling figures. Even the minister, whose office was thus taken out of his hands, knelt down behind the girl who took such wild authority upon her, and bent his face into his clasped hands, moved, as only the prevailing excitement of the time could have moved him, by that faint

tinge of possibility which was in the air. Isabel, kneeling too, took her sister's hand, and watched her with an intense gaze which seemed to penetrate to her very heart.

No one in the room except Margaret escaped the contagion of that strange emotion. She had fallen back into her chair in weakness, and gazed at them with calm and pitiful looks, like those of an angel. Hers was the only heart that beat no faster. She lay and looked at them all as a creature past all the storms of life might be supposed to look at those still tossing on its stormy tide. She was not roused by the appeal made to her faith, nor overwhelmed by the fervour of the prayers, the tears, the exclamations, the bewildered, breathless expectations by which she was surrounded. She put one arm softly round Isabel, who knelt by her side, and with her other hand took hold of Ailie's, which was stretched up over her in entreaty. There seemed to be something mesmeric in the touch of those cool, soft fingers. Ailie's outstretched arms fell; her eyes turned to Margaret's face; a strange wonder came over her countenance; her voice died away as if surprise had extinguished it; and then there was again another pause, full of fate.

'Ailie, God hears,' said the sick girl; 'and He will give me life; but not here, and not now. You're not to think your prayers refused. I'm near to the gate and I can hear the message sent. It says, "Aye, she shall be saved; aye, she shall rise up; not in earth, but in Heaven."'

'No,' said Ailie, passionately; 'it's no a true spirit of prophecy; it's an evil spirit come to tempt you. No. O ye of little faith, wherefore do ye doubt? Is the Lord to be vexed for ever with this generation that will not believe? Listen to His voice. Arise, arise! shake off the bonds of Satan. Rise up, and stand upon your feet. Margaret, let not God's servants plead in vain. Oh, hearken to me while I plead with you, harder, far harder, than I have to plead with God. Why will ye die. O house of Israel? Rise up and live: I command you in the name of the Lord!'

'Oh, if you would but try! O my Maggie, will you try?' sobbed Isabel, clasping her sister closer, and gazing with supplication beyond words in her face.

And the minister lifted his face from his hands, and looked at her; and little Mary, who had stolen in, came forward like a little wandering spirit, and threw herself, with a cry, on Margaret's shoulder, in a wild attempt to raise her up. This last effort of childish passion was more than the sick girl could bear. She turned round

upon them all with a wondering burst of patience and impatience.

'Is there no one to understand?' she said, with a plaintive cry, and drew her hands away and covered her face with them in a kind of despair. Even her own had turned, as it were, against her. Her bodily strength gave way; her heart failed her; no response woke in her mind to those wild addresses. That they should leave her alone, alone, was all she longed for—only to be left in quiet, to be at peace.

Then the minister stood up, and took Ailie by the arm. She was shivering and trembling with the revulsion, worn out with her excitement. Her moment of 'power' was over.

'You can do no more here,' he said, with a thrill in his voice which betrayed how much he himself had been moved. She is worn out, and you are worn out, and here there is no more to say. Ailie, for God's sake come with me, and disturb her no more.'

'O friends, it's the wiles of Satan,' said Ailie. 'Oh, to think he should be there! Margret—Margret, how can I leave you to perish! Let me stay by her day and night, and wrestle with Satan for his prey!'

'You will come with me,' said Mr. Lothian, firmly, and then the passionate creature burst into choking sobs and tears. Poor Margaret, whose thread of life was worn so thin, whose weakness could so ill bear the struggle, sat in the gathering twilight, and looked on while the prophetess, who had come to heal her, was led, like an exhausted child, from her presence. She thought she was alone, but a sound close to her startled her back again into a little flush of agitation. 'I am worn and weaker,' she said, driven to the limit of her powers. 'Oh, will ye let me be? Whoever you are, leave me and my life to God!'

'Margaret, it is I,' said a deep voice close to her ear. 'Why will you die? Do you know my heart will die with you, and my last hope? Am I to live to curse God? or will you live—will you live, and save a sinful soul? Margaret, because I have been ill to you have pity on me!'

Weak as she was, Margaret started from her seat. 'John Diarmid,' she cried, 'how dare ye speak to me? Am I the one to bear the blame of your blessing or your misery? If you had the heart of a man, you would go miles and miles rather than enter here.'

'I would lie at your door like a dog,' said the man in his passion, 'rather than be banished like this: but I'll go away to the ends of the earth, Margaret, Margaret, if you'll live, and not die!'

'I'll do as the Lord pleases,' said the poor girl, stretch-

ing out her feeble hands in the darkness for some support. She was worn out. Before her persecutor could reach her she had sunk upon the floor with a faintness which soon reached the length of unconsciousness. The women, rushing in at his cry, carried her to her bed. She had not fainted to be out of suffering; her heart throbbed against her breast, as though struggling to be free. Poor Margaret! The human passion was more hard to meet than all that went before.

CHAPTER V

MR. JOHN, whose appearance at the Glebe had thus moved all the spectators, had been for a long time the embodiment of pleasure-seeking and dissipation to the countryside. His had been the *jeunesse orageuse*, which, as a pleasant discipline and beginning of life, had ceased to be realised on this side of the Channel. A quaint old house on the eastern side of the Loch, and a few hill-sides which had been in the family for centuries, were all his patrimony; but his mother had transmitted a moderate fortune to her only child, which he had got rid of in his younger days in gayer scenes than could be found on the Loch. When he had returned perforce, all his money being spent, to his long-neglected home, Mr. John for some years had taken rank as the Don Giovanni of the district. He had been so far prudent or fortunate as never to be the object of any unusually grave scandal. Miss Catherine, rigid as she was in morality, had not been compelled to shut her doors against her own connection, but had been able to doubt, to extenuate, to find excuses for him. 'Left to his own will when he was but a callant,' she would say, 'flattered and served hand and foot by them that led him away. If I am to shut my doors on the poor lad, where would he get a word of advice, or be shown the error of his ways?'

It was thus that Mr. John, pursuing his pleasures with such daring as was possible, preserved still a shred of superficial character. And then the time had come when vulgar dissipation palled on the man. For a year or two he had partially recovered himself, and turned to a better life; and during this interval it was that he became acquainted with Margaret. Mr. John, whose family was unimpeachable, was a great man to Captain Duncan, whose slender connection with the aristocracy of the district was built more upon the gentility of his first wife than even on his commission. And no doubt

a rude attempt at match-making had been planned by the old soldier. As for the two principally concerned, Margaret, who knew little of his previous character, had been naturally attracted by the best-bred and best-mannered man she had ever been brought into contact with; and he, a passionate soul in his way, seeking emotion and excitement through all his pleasures, had been suddenly seized upon by the pure and visionary creature, whose life was to him as a new revelation. Yet, notwithstanding his sense of her utter purity, notwithstanding his love for her, and the new germ of moral improvement within him, the habits of his former life, and the contempt in which he held her upstart father, had led him, strange as it may seem, to entertain dishonourable designs towards the spotless girl, who looked up to him as a higher type of manhood than any she had yet met with. Captain Duncan, hot enough in all that concerned his honour, had somehow discovered his suitor's base meaning, and expelled him from his house with all the violence that belonged to his character. When Margaret became aware of the storm that raged round—when she found her lover shut out from the place, and herself forbidden to think of him, a brief tumult rose in her maidenly bosom. She might have resisted even, for her sense of justice was strong, and she had begun to love, had fiery Duncan been left to manage matters in his own way. But Mr. Lothian had stepped in with his good sense, and Jean Campbell, homely as she was, with his support, had brought her woman's wit to work on the question. The two between them brought one of Mr. John's victims quietly by night to tell her miserable story. Other miserable stories poured upon Margaret's ear when the ice was broken. She gave but one cry, and went away from them and shut herself up in her own room. Nothing was said to her of any intended disrespect to herself. If she ever guessed the existence of such a horror, she never betrayed it to mortal ear; but the parish knew well enough why it was that Mr. John had the door of the house shut upon him, and was curtsied to by Miss Catherine with awful grandeur when they met at the church-door.

This sealed his fate so far as the Loch was concerned. His own race and class abandoned him to the devil and all his angels, to whom accordingly he devoted himself for some months with renewed spirit. But disgust had entered his heart; he had seen better things, and his soul had begun to move uneasily within him. Then commenced the religious movement which stirred the parish of Loch Diarmid. Mr. John, dreary, mournful,

and alone, was one of the first to be moved by it. Here was, indeed, a religion worth having, one that held out to him the hope of immediate reward, the highest advantage that flesh and blood could hope for, deliverance from sickness, miraculous strength, favour, and power. He went into it with all the fervour of his nature. He was converted with much rejoicing on the one hand, and blackest painting of all his former errors on the other, as is natural in such cases. From penitence he went on rapidly to the highest grace, to own the inspiration of Ailie, and to believe in her and in himself. It was a curious process altogether, and yet it was not so inconsistent with nature as might have been supposed.

It had been by his special solicitation that this visit to the Glebe was made. Margaret had been ill he knew, but he did not know how ill; and with a man's natural touch of vanity, he had imagined the illness to be caused partly at least by separation from himself. He had the fullest confidence in Ailie's powers, and the most entire belief that what he and she together prayed for, in the passionate faith which they shared, would be done for them by God; but he had also in his secret heart some hope that the mere sight of him, a changed and converted man, would do much for Margaret. When he saw her, not tenderly touched by sentimental illness, but worn to the edge of the grave by consuming disease, it would be difficult to describe the shock he sustained. His passion for her revived to its fullest extent; and she was dying—dying, before his eyes. And God had promised in any case, however desperate, to hear the prayer of faith. Yet there she lay, calm, steadfast, content, not eager to be saved, crushing down the excitement at its height with the touch of her soft, cool hand. The agitation which possessed him almost rose to frenzy. He was angry with Ailie, the young leader of his faith, for requiring food and rest, and desiring to go home, instead of 'wrestling in prayer' along with him on the grassy bank beneath the Glebe. His vehemence was so extreme, that Ailie herself was moved to reprove it. 'Brother,' she said, 'you're not thinking of God's glory, you're thinking of Margaret's life. Your mind's gone wild for love of her. Set up no idols in your heart.'

'Love!' cried Mr John, 'and between her and me!—that will never be. But she must not die. She is a child of God. She is so beloved, I think half the country would follow after her. Shall we lose that great advantage to the Lord's cause? You have been my teacher in the way of life, must I be yours now?'

'Aye,' said Ailie, 'if the Lord has given you something to say.'

It was Mr. Lothian, who had followed them down the hill, who heard this strange conversation. Mr. John's face changed, as was usual with all the gifted. A kind of spasm passed over him. 'Hear the word of the Lord,' he cried; 'hear and obey! Will you go back to your selfish rest, and eat your selfish bread, and let His saint die? Is it not written, He that asketh receiveth. Shall we submit to be foiled by Satan? He is not an unjust judge, nor you a vengeful woman, and will you do less than He did to save a life? What is a night on the heather, a night on the hill, to the loss of that blessed creature? Never will she be bride of man,' he cried, with a groan,—'never bride of mine nor friend of mine that you say I'm mad with love. Our fathers lived in caves of the earth, and were hunted like beasts for the sake of the truth—and will we refuse to watch a night for the salvation of a soul? Could not ye watch with me one night? We are two together that put our trust in Him, and the Lord will remember His promise when we pray.'

'I will pray in my own chamber,' cried Ailie. 'O, John Diarmid, I ken you're a man of God! but your face frightens me, and your voice frightens me. I cannot bide with you on the hill. Lord, Lord, is it Thy will? I'll watch for her—I'll pray for her—I'll give half my life for Margaret; but I darena bide here.'

'My sins find me out,' said Mr. John; 'you are afraid of me, Ailie. You think it is the old man that speaks, and not the new.'

'No,' said Ailie, controlling herself, 'I canna fear my brother. I know you are a man of God—but oh, will not the Lord's purpose be served if we pray at home? He's as near in a chamber as on the hill. Let us not speak nor waste our strength. Let us bend our minds to it, and pray for our sister going along this weary way. It will be a holy way,' cried the girl, solemnly marching along, with her young elastic figure drawn up, her hands clasped, and her eyes raised to the sky, 'if we make every step in prayer. Oh, hear us; oh, open Thy hands to us; oh, save her, dear Lord!'

Mr. Lothian, when he told this tale, would melt almost into tears. 'She was an innocent creature,' the minister would say. He followed them softly, unseen, with a man's secret dread of the reformed sinner, ready to protect Ailie if she should want protection, and saw her move swiftly and silent along the path, never stumbling, never faltering, with her clasped hands and her eyes raised to Heaven. Broken words of prayer fell

from her lips as she went on. As for the dark shadow by her side, the minister took less note of that. But he never forgot their joint prayer, sometimes rising to a mutual outburst of supplication as they went before him over the silent road. Mr. John's spirit was rending itself with wild throes of pain, and at the same time satisfying itself with the violent strain of strongest emotion. Thus they went on until Ailie reached her mother's cottage at Lochhead. And the silent follower behind them had been praying too. When he went into the Manse, which was too quiet, too lonely for that name, the minister asked himself, would it all be without avail; would God turn a deaf ear, though the very lion and lamb together pleaded with Him for a blessing—though the sinner became pure, and the suffering walked by faith? And for his part he rounded with a sigh the excitement of the evening, and opened the Bible on his table—that Bible within whose pages there are still so many prayers unanswered, waiting till God's time shall come.

Next morning Mr. Lothian had the events of the night brought before him from another point of view. It was hard upon the minister that his house, of all houses in the parish, should be the one to shelter his young rival—a man in himself totally uncongenial to him. But so it was; he had incautiously received a guest whom he found it impossible to send away; and Mr. Lothian had been compelled to look on and see the young fellow all but win the prize on which his own heart had been set for so long. How the trifling youth could have caught Isabel's fancy was a mystery to the good man; but naturally such a fact gave to every foolish word he uttered a double importance in his host's jealous and wondering eyes.

'I hear there was a prayer-meeting—or something—last night up at the Glebe,' said Stapylton. 'Was it effectual, do you know?'

'What do you mean by effectual?' said the minister, gravely.

'Oh, I thought it might have had one of two effects,' said the young man with careless contempt. 'It might have cured the patient, you know; or at least, so they say. And they might have prayed her to death, which I should think the most likely, for my part.'

'I did not know you were so well informed,' said Mr. Lothian, who was in no conciliatory mood.

'Oh, yes, I am posted up,' said Stapylton, with a vain laugh, for which his companion could have knocked him down. 'I think they will find it difficult to cure consumption; but the greater the difficulty the greater

the miracle. It shows, at least, that they are not afraid.'

'It shows they are not impostors, as you seem to think them,' said the minister with some heat.

'Oh, dear, no, not impostors,' said Stapylton; 'not any more than other people. We are all impostors, I suppose, more or less.'

'Your views are too advanced for our rural minds,' said Mr. Lothian, growing more and more angry in spite of himself. 'We don't understand them. Impostors are rare in this country-side.'

'Oh, yes, I believe you,' said Stapylton insolently. 'Do you mean to say you put any faith in that praying crew? Did you think their shouting and bawling could do any good to that poor, consumptive creature——'

'Is it Margaret Diarmid you are speaking of?' said the minister; and the men paused and looked in each other's faces. Stapylton had gone further than he meant to go. Isabel's sister was nothing to him, though he loved Isabel in his selfish way. He had no respect for Margaret as a woman, or as a sick woman; he had no appreciation of her character. She was to him simply a poor, consumptive creature, whom he would be glad to have killed or cured out of his way. If Isabel were ever his, she should not long retain any foolish devotion to her sister. Therefore he could not understand the scorn and indignation of Mr. Lothian's eyes.

'Well,' he said, 'I would not hurt her sister's feelings by calling her so, you know. We're all impostors, as I said. But still you know that is what the girl is, all the same.'

The minister rose from the table impatiently, and made no answer. And this was the man to whom Isabel had given her heart!

CHAPTER VI

'I AM saying nothing against Ailie,' said Jean Campbell, 'no a word. Our Margaret upholds her as a God-fearing lass; but maybe she was going beyond her tether when she came praying ower our Margaret. 'No, it was of nae avail. I never expected it for my part.'

'It maun have been want of faith,' said one of the eager spiritual gossips who had flocked around Jean to hear the news. 'Human nature is so full o' shortcomings. We've a' looked up to her for her godly life; but the Lord will not put up with our idols. You've made an idol o' Margaret Diarmid, asking her prayers; but now she's weighed and found wanting. It's been lack of faith.'

'I dinna see how that can be,' said another. 'She's won us a' blessings morning and night. I've seen Heaven written plain in her face if ever it was written in a face in this world. Na; it must have been that they were lukewarm in their prayers.'

'Hoots! they canna ay win,' said a third neighbour; 'if a' the world was to be full of miracles where would us living folk be?'

'But it'll be a sair discouragement to the spread of the truth,' said Mary White of the Mill, who had spoken first. 'The enemy will cry out sore, like as if it was a triumph. And it's ill for them of feeble minds to hear that Margaret Diarmid hasn't faith to be saved, or Ailie Macfarlane lost her power.'

'I would like to see the one that has more faith than our Margaret,' said Jean Campbell, wounded in her tenderest point. 'As for Ailie she's a wonderful lass, but she's upsetting with her prophet's ways. If it had been the Lord's will, would He have bided for Ailie to ask Him? Would He no have done it for our Margret that has kent Him longer and followed Him better? I'm no pretending to ken mysel—but if ever there was a saint of God it's our Margret; and naebody need say anything else to me.'

'There's naebody in our parish would try,' cried Jenny Spence, who was a connection. 'As for Ailie Macfarlane she canna be said rightly to belong to the parish. It's weel kent she was brought up in the Rue, and a' her friends bide down by the Loch-end. I canna see ony reason for following after her, and thinking licht of our ain.'

'Did you never hear, ye silly women,' said a voice over their heads, 'that a prophet has nae honour in his ain country? Bring in the new light, and cast out the wisdom that dwells among us: that's ay been the world's opinion since lang before it was divided into parishes. As for this poor lassie you make such a work about, she's hysterical, and that's the explanation of her cure and her prophesying; no that the creature means ill. She's an innocent creature, so far as I can see *the noo*; but how lang her innocence will last if this goes on—'

'Nae doubt you're a fine authority, Maister Galbraith,' said Mary, with a toss of her head; 'you that believe in naething, neither spirit nor deevil, like the auld Sadducees. It's grand to come and get lessons from you.'

'I believe in more than you believe in, Mary, my woman,' said the schoolmaster, who had interrupted the talk; 'but I'll no go into controversy. Jean Campbell, I'm wanting a word with you, if you'll come inbye as you're passing, after a' this important business is done; you were ay good at settling the affairs of the parish—'

but if I were you I would leave the other world in peace till you win there.'

'It's much he kens about the ither world,' said Mary White as the schoolmaster passed on. 'Poor auld haverel, with his Latin and his poetry, that never could get a kirk, even in the auld Moderate times.'

The gossip thus came to an abrupt termination, and Jean Campbell went on her way without further pause to the schoolhouse door.

'Weel, Jean, my woman,' said the maister, 'how's a' with ye? It's a bonnie day.'

'After a' the saft weather we've had,' said Jean, making the conventional answer which was expected of her. 'And we're a' very weel but Margret, who's no long for this world, Maister Galbraith, though it's sair news to tell.'

'No a word about that,' said the maister, hastily, 'and a' the fools in the country-side living and thriving! I will not speak of what I cannot understand. It's no about her I'm wanting you, but about bonnie Isabel.'

'About Isabel?' said Jean, wondering: and to herself she added, 'Eh, if the auld fuil's head should be turned like the lave with that bit lassie!' a mental exclamation which was unexpectedly brought to light, as it were, by one of the Dominie's broad sudden smiles.

'I might be her grandfather,' he said; 'and whiles I feel as if I was grandfather to a' these heedless things. You've had your ain ado, Jean, my woman, with the Captain's family. Before ever you married Duncan, you mind what I said.'

'I'm no complaining,' said Jean, with intense and lofty pride.

'No,' said the maister, 'you're no the one to complain. You're too spirity for that, and too proud. And Margaret for one knows what you've done; but as for me, that have ay taken an interest in them, I'm wanting you to do more than ever, and I know you'll no be asked in vain.'

'You had ay a skilfu' tongue, maister,' said Jean: 'you were ay one to while the bird off the tree, when you liket to try. What is't that's coming noo?'

Upon which the maister laughed softly, for it was a point upon which he was susceptible to flattery.

'It's no laughing matter,' he said; 'you'll give me your best attention, Jean. You and me are not the folk to meddle with love and lovers in their wooings and nonsense; but there are times when the like of us must interfere. Bonnie Isabel is but a bairn. I know she is Margaret's twin, but there's a wonderful difference between them for all that; and yon English lad at the

Manse will beguile the lass if we do not take the better heed, you and me.'

'Beguile our Isabel!' said Jean, scornfully. 'You ken heaps of things, maister, but no the heart of the like of her. If it was a lass out of the village, I wouldna say: but our Isabel's a lady born.'

'I stand corrected,' said the maister; 'you're a woman of sense, Jean Campbell, and know better than me. I cannot express myself like you, but this was what I meant—that if we did not take heed, you and me, bonnie Isabel would be led further than she means to go; and the world, that is always an ill-thinking world, would make out a case of appearances against her. I've seen her with yon lad upon the hill——'

'And what's about that?' said Jean; 'is a lass never to speak to a lad but afore witnesses? And what's the use of being young if you come to that? The lads have maist of the good things in this world; if a bonnie lass is no to have the upper hand o' them and gie their heartstrings a bit wring when she has the power to do it. Na, na, maister, if you want her to let the lad be——'

'She's ta'en a good grip of some other heartstrings I know,' said the maister, 'more's the pity. You've no bowels, you women. If it was but his heart that was in question, I do not say I would make much moan; but it is her credit, which is more to the purpose. Do not fire up at me; he was near running off with her the other night. You ask me how I know? Is not every secret word of your mouth or thought of your heart proclaimed on the housetops? If she were to go a step with him, it would be a sore heart for Margaret, and long would Isabel rue the day.'

'I'll not believe it,' said Jean. 'She's prouder than the Marchioness, if you come to that. Her give way to a lad! I wouldna believe it if it was sworn to by a' the Loch. She has mair spirit than that.'

'Love's blind,' said the maister, with a melting tone in his harsh old voice; 'it thinks no evil. He swears to her he means her well, and I would not say he did not mean well; but the day she's that lad's wife will be an ill day for Isabel, and all the more if she runs off with him. Whisht! and hear me out. They have quarrelled to-day, but to-morrow they will be 'greed again—and she has no mother. I trust her, Jean Campbell, to you.'

'I dinna believe it, no a word,' said Jean, rising from her chair: 'but I ay do my best. No but Isabel is a sair handful, with her pride and her hasty ways. It's the flower of a' that the Lord winna spare. Eh, maister, it's mair than I can understand.'

'No a word of that,' said the Dominie, 'or you and me will criticise our Maker, and that mustna be. He must have some reason. Thae birds' eggs are your Jamie's, Jean. He's a strange callant, awfu' slow at his lessons, and awfu' gleg on the hill.'

'The hill will do him little good, maister,' said Jean, discontented, 'if you would but make him mind his book! It would be a terrible cross to me if he didna get on with his education, and him the Captain's son.'

'He'll never mind his book,' said the Dominie, promptly, 'no more than his father before him. Make him a sodger if you please, like Duncan. If ye insist on schools and college, he'll never be wiser than a stickit minister, like me.'

'Eh, but it's ower muckle learning with you!' cried Jean, bewildered by the smile with which the maister described his condition. She had so described him herself, not without a touch of contempt. But at the present moment her mortification about her boy was swallowed up in reverential terror for the man who thus appreciated his own misfortunes. 'It's because my Jamie's ower useful with the birds' eggs, and the trash o' flowers they are ay gathering,' Jean said to herself, as she went home; 'but I'll send him where he'll be well kept to his book, if the maister speaks like that to his mother again.'

CHAPTER VII

EXCITEMENT had once more sunk into calm at the Glebe Cottage; but Margaret, though she had recovered her composure, had suffered so much from the shock as to be unable to leave her bed next day.

On the other side of the wall sat Isabel trying in vain to occupy herself with her usual work. Her sister's state had filled all her thoughts the previous night. Hopes and fears about her recovery, awe and excitement about the means to be used, a terrible strain of suspense, and blank of disappointment when all was over, had withdrawn Isabel's mind entirely from her own affairs.

All at once she started, and sprang to her feet, changed as by a spell. She stood for a moment, irresolute, between her seat and the window. Then, by degrees, her whole expression altered. Her lip melted into the ghost of a smile, light came back to her pretty eyes; after a pause of consideration, she sat down once more by the wall. 'I couldna leave Margaret,' she said to herself. And she took up her work again, and worked briskly for about thirty seconds. Then she paused—

listened—smiled. Ah! there could be no doubt about it. That was the accidental pebble that had struck the window. That was the soft, faint whistle, the merest whisper of a call which breathed on the air. He had come back, after all. It changed the entire current of Isabel's thoughts in a moment. She had no further desire to go out, no impatience of her loneliness. These sounds had reconciled her to life and to herself. He was there, that was enough. She had even a pleasure in thinking he would have his walk and his waiting for nothing. She reminded herself of her anger and of her duty. Nothing in the world could induce her to leave Margaret. Her closed lips took a demure expression, as she sat and listened with a certain mischievous content. The blank which had seemed so intolerable and so permanent a few minutes before, flushed now with a thousand rosy colours. It was easy to deny herself, it was rather a pleasure than a pain to remain alone, so long as she knew that he watched for her and that she had not been forsaken.

Half an hour passed, and twice Isabel had heard, with a widening of the smile or half-smile round her mouth, the familiar pebble on the window, when Jean Campbell came suddenly into the room where she was sitting. It had once occurred to Isabel, with some anxiety, that Margaret alone, in her retirement, lying still in the unbroken silence, might hear these sounds and interpret them aright; but she thought of no one else, and cared for no one else, in her youthful pride. Her stepmother's entrance disturbed her and moved her to impatience. It was seldom Jean came so far without special invitation, and never to join Isabel, who was less gentle, less patient, and had a much warmer, hastier temper than Margaret. She came in, however, on this occasion without so much, the girl angrily remarked, 'as a knock at the door.' Isabel stopped working and raised her astonished eyes to Jean with a demonstrative surprise. 'Did you want anything?' she asked, in her pretty, clear, but, so far as poor Jean was concerned, unsympathetic voice.

'I wanted to see if you were here,' said Jean, with a mixture of softness and resentment.

'Where could I be but here,' said Isabel, 'and Margaret lying in her bed? Maybe you thought I was out enjoying myself,' she added, with a certain pique; and just at that moment, borne upon a stronger gust than usual, came a bewildering echo of the distant whistle. In spite of herself she changed colour a little, and clutched at her work, as if to shut out the sound.

'Eh, listen!' said Jean; 'what's that? I've heard it

near an hour about the house. I hope it's nae ill-doer waiting about to watch for an open door.'

To this unsuitable accusation Isabel listened very demurely, returning to her work. The idea amused her, and converted the half-suppressed irritation with which she was too often in the habit of addressing Jean Campbell, to a certain equally repressed sense of fun. As for Jean, she looked suspiciously at her companion, and continued—

'There's mair ways of stealing than one. It might be some lad that would never meddle with siller or gold; but there's things mair precious than siller or gold—eh, Isabel, my woman!' cried honest Jean, with a thrill of true feeling in her voice.

'What are you speaking of?' said Isabel, coldly. 'To hear you, folk would think you had some meaning. There's little to steal at the Glebe, if that's what you are thinking. Most likely it's your son Jamie, wasting his time on the moor instead of learning his lessons. You need not be feared for him.'

'I'm no feared for my Jamie,' cried Jean, indignant. 'He's your father's son as well as mine, Isabel, though you're so proud. He's your brother, and maybe the time will come when you'll be glad to mind that. If I could think,' she added, suddenly changing her tactics and making a direct attack, 'that you had the heart to keep your lad waiting on the hill, and our Margret in her bed! Eh, and there's the proof,' she added, as an indiscreet pebble at that moment glanced upon the window. 'I said it, but I could not think it—the like of this from you!'

Isabel's cheeks flushed scarlet. She had been full of a great burst of indignation when this sudden evidence against her struck her ear and checked her utterance. To be sure she was in no way to blame, but yet appearances were against her, and her indignant self-defence was shorn of its fullness.

'I have nothing to do with it,' she cried; 'I've sat by Margaret's bedside the whole day. How am I to tell what folk may do outside? It's no concern of mine. And you've no business to meddle with me,' cried the girl, with hot unwilling tears.

'Isabel,' cried Jean, with solemnity, 'you think very little of me. I'm no a lady like you, though I was your father's wife; but I'm the oldest woman in the house, and I ken mair than you do, aye, or Margaret either. There was ane that warned me that I should do my duty to you and speak out. It would be easier for me to hold my tongue. It's ay the easiest to hold your tongue; but ane that is your friend——'

'I know who that is,' cried Isabel, with flashing eyes, 'and I think he might have known I could guide myself, and would have no meddling from you!'

'Na, you didna ken who it was,' said her stepmother; 'it was ane that has kent you all your days; and it's no that he has any cause to be jealous like him you're thinking o'. Eh, that other ane! Poor man! it makes my heart sair to look in his face. A man that might ken better—and no a thought in his head but how to please a lassie's heedless eye.'

'There is many a thought in his head,' cried Isabel, 'I'll not have you speak of my friends. Let me alone. I'm sitting listening if Margaret cries on me, and thinking of nobody. If the best man in the world was there, I would not go to the window to look at him; but don't torment me, or I cannot tell what I may do.'

'I'll no be threatened,' said Jean, with equal spirit, 'and I'll say what's in my heart to say. If you go on with that English lad it'll be to your destruction, Isabel. I was warned to say it, and I'll say it—like it or not, as you please. When I have a burden on my mind, it's no you that will stop me. If you take up with the lad at the Manse, the English lad——'

'Mr. Lothian will disapprove,' said Isabel, with a toss of her head.

'I've nothing ado with Mr. Lothian,' she said. 'I'm no speaking from him. You'll rue the day, Isabel. I'm no for putting a lass in a prison and forbidding her to speak to a man. Would I mind if it was a' in play? I was ance a young lass mysel. But yon lad, he's in earnest. And if he beguiles you to listen to him, you'll rue the day!'

Isabel had risen to her feet in indignation, and was about to reply, when a faint call from Margaret interrupted the combatants. Probably Jean had raised her voice unduly, though neither of them were aware of it. It was Isabel Margaret called, and 'Let *her* come too,' added the invalid. This was how they generally described to each other their father's wife. The two paused abashed, and went into the little room behind. Margaret had raised herself up on her pillows, and sat erect, with a flush on her cheeks. The excitement of the previous night had not yet died away. Its effect was to give her the feverish beauty which belongs to her complaint. She had her small Bible clasped between her two white worn hands, as she had been reading it. 'Come in,' she said, 'come in,' holding out her hand to Jean, who lingered at the door. Though she was so beautiful in her weakness, it was death that was in Margaret's face.

'I want to speak to you both,' she said; 'why will ye quarrel, you two, the moment I'm away?'

'We were not quarrelling,' said Isabel, turning her back upon her stepmother.

'Na,' added Jean, in explanation; 'it was nae quarrel. It was me that was speaking. I'm no a lady born like you; but I'm the Captain's widow, and a woman of experience, and I will not hold my tongue and see a young lass fall into trouble. Margaret, it's no meaning to vex you; but she's aye keeping on a troke and a kindness with that English lad.'

Isabel turned round with hasty wrath and flushed cheeks; but her resentment was useless. She caught her sister's eye, to whom she could never make any false pretences; and suddenly bent down her head, and hid her face. To Margaret she had no defence to make, even though at this moment she was without blame.

'Then it is him I hear on the hill,' said Margaret. 'Isabel, go and bring him in to speak to me.'

'Bring him in—here?' asked both the bystanders in a breath, aghast at the command. The amazement of their tone, and the glance they cast round the little room, brought a slight additional colour to Margaret's cheek.

'Bring him here,' she repeated; 'I've gone so far on my way that I'm free to do what I please. I cannot seek him out or stop him on the road. Isabel, go and bring him in to me.'

Isabel, who had grown suddenly pale and begun to tremble, hesitated to obey. 'O my Maggie!' she said, clasping her hands; and in her desperation she turned to her stepmother with an appealing glance. Jean was at her wits' end, divided between lively dislike and repugnance to 'the English lad,' and that absolute reverence for Margaret which made it difficult to resist any of her wishes.

'He's no worthy,' she said, with trembling eagerness; 'he's no fit to come into this chamber and speak face to face with the like of you. Let me gang and speak to him. We mustna be ower anxious; he's but coortin' like the other lads. It's no as if him and Isabel had given each other their troth. It's but a diversion, like a' the rest. I'll speak to him canny, and send him away.'

'It's no diversion,' said Isabel, hotly, under her breath. Margaret sat in the abstraction of her weakness between the two who were so warm with life and all its emotions, clasping her little Bible in her hands.

'No,' she said, softly; 'you mistake Bell. She is not like one of the lasses at Lochhead, to meet him and speak to him for diversion, as you say. It's different

And there's none to guard her but me. You're very good—you've always been good to us both. Don't be angry if she's impatient. She's but young,' Margaret went on, with a pathetic smile and her eyes fixed on Jean, who by this time was crying without restraint; 'when she knows more of the world, she'll see that you're a good woman and have ever been a help and comfort to her and me. But I am mother and sister and all to Isabel as long as I live; and I'll no live long, and I would like to speak a word to him. Bell, you must dry your eyes and bring the young man to me.'

'I'll do what you bid me, if it was to break my heart,' said the weeping Isabel.

Margaret made no reply. She knew that Isabel was perfectly sincere, and yet she knew that the flutter in the girl's bosom was not for her sister but her lover. While Isabel stole slowly, reluctantly away, Margaret sat propped among her pillows, watching with soft eyes. She was herself so much beyond the world—so ready to go; so far on her way, as she herself expressed it, that the tumult of feeling in her sister's bosom appeared to her almost like the baby flutterings of childhood. But Jean, whose experience was of a different kind, stood looking after the girl with mingled indignation and sympathy.

'It's hard on her,' said the stepmother. 'You ken an awfu' deal mair than me, Margret; but you dinna see it's hard upon her as I do: though I could never forgive her thinking of anything serious, and you so ill. We maun a' hae our little diversion,' Jean added, after a pause. 'It's but that. It couldna be marrying and giving in marriage the lass was thinking of, and you so far from well.'

'Would it not be more unkind if it was mere diversion?' said Margaret.

'Na,' said Jean quickly, 'a lass like a bairn must whiles have the play. We're a' the better o't. And Isabel meant nae mair. She's thoughtless whiles, but she has a tender heart. You canna believe she was planning out her life and you lying suffering here?'

'She's so young,' said Margaret, though a momentary contraction passed over her face. It was meet that Isabel's life should be planned out before she was left alone in the world.

Isabel for her part went very slowly to the door, and looked up and down the road, to cheat her own conscience into the belief that she was obeying her sister. She took a few steps round the house in the wrong direction to look for the watcher, and went back to the door with a relieved heart, not having seen him. Her

heart was not detached from her first love, but she had been much shaken in her belief in him at their last meeting; and though she denied indignantly that it was 'diversion,' she trembled to bring Stapyhton to the length of an interview with Margaret, thereby binding him and herself for ever. So Isabel thought in her simplicity. 'It would be as bad as being married,' she said to herself; and she had no desire to be married. All that her heart asked could be given by those chance meetings, by the sweet sense of being loved, the charm of the tender secret which was between the two. To go any further at such a moment would have shocked and startled the girl; and what was to be done if she brought him to Margaret, but that the most serious consequences might follow. She was incapable of 'diverting herself,' as Jean thought, but yet had no inclination to quicken the pace of life, or rush upon facts. Serious existence looked still distant and far off, and Isabel approached it with tender delay, with soft wistfulness and reluctance. It would come to that eventually, no doubt. But why should Horace, why should Margaret, be so impatient now?

Isabel stood at the door, and her flushed face cooled in the evening air, and the beating of her heart grew less loud, but she could not see her lover on the road. 'He must have gone away back, if he was ever there,' she said, when she returned to Margaret's room, or 'maybe it was but the peeweeep on the hill.'

'It was nae peeweeep,' said Jean Campbell, turning round; but she was charitable enough to say no more, when she saw the look of anxiety on Isabel's face.

'If he's gone there is no more to be said,' said Margaret; and then she sighed. 'It is not because I'm going,' she added, with a smile, as it were correcting herself, 'but because I would fain put myself in God's place for my bonnie Bell; as if He did not love her more than I can—as if she were not safest with him!'

And then poor Isabel, full of remorse, bent down her head upon her sister's outstretched hands. Could she trust Margaret, perfect as she was, to see all her thoughts; all the fancies that rose in her mind as God did? Jean Campbell, whose homely mind was free of these complications, withdrew at this point, drying her eyes and shaking her head.

'And she's nae aulder than Isabel!' said the humble stepmother. It was the most pathetic commentary that could have been made.

CHAPTER VIII

'I WOULD not have thought,' said Miss Catherine, looking steadily at young Stapylton, who had gone to pay her a visit, 'that the farming over the hill was worth so long study. They must be wearying for you at home.'

'There are more things than the farming,' said Horace; 'there is the grouse, for instance, and it will soon be September. The folks at home have to make up their mind to it. A man is not like a girl.'

'The Lord forbid!' said Miss Catherine, 'or fathers and mothers would have little comfort of their lives. I hope there's a pleasant young sister to keep them company at home.'

'Oh, there are three girls, thank you,' said young Stapylton, carelessly, 'they are jolly enough. It's against my principles to be always turning up at the Hall. What is the good of being young if one is not to have a little freedom? I suppose I shall settle down some time like my father. It's very respectable and all that, but it's not amusing. Women never can understand a man. You think we should be tied down to all the old cut-and-dry habits like yourselves.'

'No,' said Miss Catherine, 'it is not to be expected we should understand you. We are creatures of a lower class, as is well known. But still you know the very dogs come to a kind of comprehension of their masters. I would think the Hall and the neighbours you have known all your days, and the hunting and such like, would have as many charms as Mr. Lothian and the grouse. It's but a poor sphere for you here.'

'Well, I suppose so long as I am content, that is enough,' said Horace, with a feeling that he was being laughed at; and then he added, with an attempt at sarcasm, 'Besides there are a great many superior people here; and this movement is very interesting to a student of human nature, you know.'

'And what does a student of human nature make of the movement?' said Miss Catherine, grimly, looking at the young fellow with her penetrating grey eyes. He was not the blasé young man of the present day, experienced in everything and weary of all. He was not sufficiently polished for the soft sneer and universal derision now current among us, but he was the first rough sketch of that accomplished personage; the fashion had come in, or at least had reached to his level. But it was a rough species of the art, and only good as an essay.

'Well,' said Horace, with a certain grandeur, an air which had often imposed upon Isabel, who knew no better, 'I suppose it is just one of the ordinary religious swindles. But the simplicity of the people makes it look better than usual, to begin with. And it is only beginning. One can't tell at first what follies such a business may fall into. The woman is mad, I suppose; or else she has taken this way of thrusting herself into notice. She is rather pretty, too. Somebody might be fool enough to marry her, if she was taken up by the better class. As for the men, I suppose they have some motive: ambition to be first among their neighbours, or love of excitement, or something. It is like whisky; and then it don't lead to trouble as whisky does.'

Miss Catherine was much opposed to 'the movement' herself; but her soul was moved within her by this speech.

'Do you tell them your opinions as frankly at the Glebe?' she said, quietly; and her companion changed colour somewhat at the question.

'Well, you know, the eldest girl is of the same way of thinking,' he said. 'It is quite natural she should be. She is very ill, and she must come to that, sooner or later; and then they all think it's a chance for her to get better. I don't wonder, in the least, at Margaret. The other—don't know what to think,' he added, with a little reluctance: 'but, of course, one would not shock the feelings of two girls.'

'That's good of you,' said Miss Catherine; 'and I see the force of what you say. Religion is what we must all come to, sooner or later. It's a very fine way of putting it, and shows a perception of character—But, my young friend, is it right of you to turn your steps night after night towards the Glebe? I am never at my west window in the evening, but I see you with your face that way. They are gentlewomen by the mother's side, and no farther off than fifth cousins from the family at Ardallan: but their father was only a trooper, and they have little siller. Would your father be pleased with such a bride as Isabel for his heir? Not but what she is fit for a duke,' said Miss Catherine, warmly, once more fixing her companion with her eye.

'Bride?' said the young man, blushing violently, and gazing at her, surprised; and then, for the first time, his tone changed. 'She is sweet enough, and pretty enough, for a queen,' he said; and then added—'if that were all!' with a sigh.

'Yes, but it is not all,' said Miss Catherine, somewhat melted. 'There are many things to be taken into consideration. Old folk and young folk have different

notions; and unless your people know what you're doing, Mr. Horace, my advice would be that you should go no more to the Glebe.'

'Oh, that's all nonsense!' said Horace, recovering himself. 'Things have not gone so far as that. Poor little thing! she wants some amusement; her sister is always ill, and nobody with her but that woman. She is a pretty little thing, and I like to talk to her; and so, it appears, does she to me.'

'And that is all?' said Miss Catherine, with a return of the grimness to her face.

'That is all,' said Horace, lightly, 'we may chatter to each other I hope now and then without going to the last extremity. I know what you are going to say, that there is somebody else ready to step in, and that I am standing in the way of her prospects.—Such prospects!—a man old enough to be her father, with a humdrum Manse to offer her. She ought to do better than that. In short, I am a defence to keep Mr. Lothian off,' he added, with a laugh, which his high colour and the contraction of his forehead belied. 'Confound the old inquisitor!' he was saying to himself, 'what has she to do with it—am I bound to tell her everything?' Miss Catherine's looks grew blacker and blacker as she listened.

'You give a bonnie account of yourself,' she said. 'if you want nothing but to chatter with her, how dare ye stand between her and an honest man that loves her? When Margaret dies—and we all know that calamity cannot be long averted—is it your will, for the sake of your amusement, that a bonnie, tender creature should be left without friend or guide in the world? Yes, I know what you think,' said Miss Catherine, growing hot; 'you think she's so soft and sweet, that you can play as you please. But mind what I say, you may go too far with Isabel: she is young, and younger than she might be, but she is not of a light nature to be guided by you. If you play her false, be it in one way, be it in another, you'll get your punishment. Now you have heard what I have to say, and you can go on your own way, and take your own course, like all your kind; but you've got warning of what will follow. And now, Mr. Horace Stapylton,' said Miss Catherine, rising and making him a stately curtsey. 'I am obliged to bid you good day.'

Horace started to his feet amazed beyond description by this dismissal. 'I am shocked to have intruded upon you,' he said, angrily; 'I shall take care never to repeat the infliction.'

'That shall be as you please,' said Miss Catherine.

with another curtsey, and the young man found himself with artful incaution to Isabel, when despite all that had occurred, he succeeded in meeting her 'by accident' on the hill: 'and all for your sake. You are getting out of the room and out of the house almost before he recovered his consciousness. 'Old hag!' he said to himself, 'old Scotch cat!—venomous old maid!' as he walked down the avenue. But he was worsted notwithstanding, and felt his defeat.

'She turned me out of the house,' he said, afterwards, 'me into disgrace with everybody. They upbraid me for following you, for taking up your time, for keeping others away; and the folk at home write to ask if I am never coming back. People look glum at me wherever I go for your sake, and you will do nothing for me: I must say it is rather too bad.'

'I would do anything for you,' said Isabel. 'I would not mind what all the world might say. They might gloom at me, and welcome; what would I care? anything but one thing, Horace—and that you know—you see—I could not do.'

'Which, of course, is the only thing I want,' said the young man, sullenly. 'That is always the way with girls.'

'And why should you want it so?' said Isabel, eagerly. 'We're young, and we can wait. If all your folk were ready and willing, could I leave my Margaret? Horace, you know as well as I do she has been my comfort a' my days; there is not one like her far or near. If you think, as other folk think, that Ailie is nearer God than our Margaret, oh, it shows how little you know,' cried Isabel, with the hot colour rushing over her face; 'and could I forsake her that has been like a mother to me? What is love, if it's like that?'

'I don't think you know what love means,' said Horace: 'it is to give up all for one; it is to forsake father and mother—and your past life—and your prospects, as people call them—and good sense and caution and prudence, and all your Scotch qualities;—that is what love is, Isabel; to think of nobody, and care for nobody, but one; to give all your heart, and not a bit of it. I don't ask you for a bit of it; I want you all—every thought, every feeling. I want you to give up everybody and come to me—to me!' and here the young man opened his arms and turned to her with a look of passion which startled the girl. She made a sudden sidelong step beyond one of the great heather clumps before she answered. The colour changed from red to pale on her face; but she kept her eyes fixed on him, with a look of eagerness and wistfulness, trying to penetrate beneath the surface and see his heart.

'Horace,' she said, softly, 'you and me are different—a man and a girl are different, I suppose. That is not what it is to me. It is something that makes life better, and stronger, and sweeter. I'm fonder of Margaret, I'm better to the bairns. Don't turn away like that. It is like wine,' cried the girl, with light rising in her eyes; 'it gives you strength for all you have to do. You're at your work, you're minding your house, you're vexed and wearied and troubled—and lo, you give a glance out of the window, and you see *him* pass, and all your trouble rolls away! That's love to me. When you turn round and give me a smile, it's like wine,' cried Isabel once more; 'I feel it all about my heart—I go back to my work, and something sings within me. I am neither tired nor troubled more. That's love to me! And the world's bonnier and the sky's brighter,' she went on faltering, 'Oh, Horace, surely you know what I mean?'

'No, I don't know what you mean,' cried the young man, with a kind of brutality. 'I never understand your Scotch. If this is the sort of figure I am to cut, making you devote yourself more to Margaret and the bairns, as you call them, I had better take myself off, it would seem. A fellow is not to lose the best days of his life for such a reward as that.'

Isabel looked at him with but partial comprehension; her point of view was more elevated than his, but yet it was limited, like his, to her own side of the question. She looked at his clouded brow and averted face with a woman's first violent effort to enter into a state of feeling which was the antipodes of her own. Slowly it dawned upon her that it might be as just as her own though so different. She clasped her arms round the slender white stem of a young birch-tree, and leant against it, gazing at her lover with dreamy eyes.

'Maybe it's all true,' she said, slowly, 'both what I think and what you think, Horace. It will break my heart, but I can bear it if that is best. Go away into the world, and please your own folk—and I'll wait for you; I'll wait all my life: I'll wait years and years. Why should you lose your best days for me? Oh, I see well it is neither just nor right; and me that has so little to give! It's a sin to keep you here,' she continued, tears, unthought of, dropping from her eyes. 'Loch Diarmid comes natural to me, and folk forget—But go, Horace, and think on me sometimes; and my heart will go with you; and if you should ever come back you'll find me waiting here.'

'Isabel, this is all folly and nonsense,' cried young Stapylton. 'What are you crying about? am I talking

of going away? It is all very easy to send a fellow off and make a fuss, or to keep him hanging on, and kicking his heels among this confounded heather. Can't you do what I want you instead? it's simple enough. What's the good of living in Scotland if you can't get married how you please? If I were to go away I might never come back. They'd keep fast hold of me at home, or they'd pack me off somewhere out of reach; and you would change, and I might change. Who can undertake what would happen? I don't believe in comings back. I should find you Mrs. Somebody or other with half a dozen—Hallo, where are you going now?

'I'm going home,' said Isabel, drying her tears indignantly. 'It's late, and I cannot enter into such questions. I am not one to change; but, Mr. Stapylton, if that's your way of thinking it's far best it should all come to an end. I don't want to be married. I will never leave my sister. If you will have an answer yes or no, there's your answer. Never, never, if she should live a dozen years!—and God send she may live a dozen years, and a dozen more to that!' cried Isabel with a sob. 'My Margaret, that never has a thought but for me! And to bid me run away and shame the house, and break her heart—and to call it love!' said the girl, with an outburst of tears.

She had come back to the birch and leant her pretty head upon the graceful young tree, which waved its tender branches over her with a curious sympathetic resemblance to her own drooping form, while her lover drew near her slowly, his heart melting, though his temper was still ruffled. He was going to her to take her in his arms, to whisper his final arguments, to woo her with his breath on her cheek. At such a moment it did not occur to the young man to look around him, to guard against interruption; and, perhaps, in the soft twilight he could scarcely have perceived the lonely personage who was winding with a noiseless step among the heather, full of her own thoughts.

The dew was falling among the slender birches, and on the heather and gorse—the wild gale underfoot filled the air with sweetness, and with this soft perfume came the soft stir of silence, the breath of the great quiet, which gave a musical tone to the atmosphere. The shadows were falling over the loch and the hills; points of view that had been visible one moment were invisible the next; and all at once, up in the blue heavens, stars were revealing themselves, here and there one, like lamps among the clouds. A night to tempt anyone to linger in the open air, in the quiet, sweet, soft, darkling, humid twilight, full of the silences and splendours of nature,

and unawares moved by some brooding of God. The other figure which, veiled by night, and by abstracting thought, was wandering devious on those hills, thinking little of where she went or whom she met, was in her way a better embodiment of the sentiment of the night than were the agitated lovers. It was Ailie Macfarlane come out to roam at eventide like Isaac. She had a shawl over her head after the primitive fashion common to all nations, her head veiled because of the angels. Sometimes she stumbled among the heather, not remarking whither her foot strayed. The darkling world in which those solemn hills stood up each folded in his twilight mantle, with stars about his head and a forehead wet with dew, was full of God to the inspired maiden. Her eyes were moist, like all the earth, with dew. Her mind was full, not of thought but of a quiet consciousness. The poetry that was love to Isabel was to Ailie, God. She was in His presence, His great eyes were upon her, at any moment she might hear His voice calling to her, as Adam heard it in the cool of the garden. As she strayed upon the hills alone with that great trembling, thrilling Nature which was conscious, too, of His presence, the Lord had strayed communing with His Father. He had passed the whole night there, as His servant was not able to do. He had gone down the darkling slopes and set his foot, unaware of the restrictions of nature, upon the gleaming silvery waters below as she could have done on the loch had her faith been but strong enough. 'More faith! more faith!' she murmured to herself as she went, 'O Lord, increase my faith.' Her young soul was burning within her with the cravings which Margaret Diarmid had divined; not soft submission to Him that rules Heaven and earth, but eager anticipations, restless energy, a heart full of passion. Joan of Arc might so have strayed on her southern moors; though it was from the yoke of Satan that Ailie longed to deliver her people—from wickedness, and disease, and misery. Why should not she? Had not the Lord promised *whatsoever ye ask*? Had not He granted to all eyes authentic wonders? Was His arm shortened that it could not save? or was there anything wanted but faith, more faith?

The sound of voices roused her from her abstraction, first to a sudden flush of annoyance, and then, as she perceived the two figures before her, to a warm thrill of zeal for their conversion. 'The Lord has delivered them into my hand,' the enthusiast said to herself. Their backs were turned to her, and their minds so much occupied that even the crackle of the heather under her foot did not betray her approach. She was close by their

side, laying a sudden hand upon the shoulder of each before they were even aware of her presence.

'What do ye here?' said Ailie, rising as it seemed to them like a ghost out of the darkness. The two sprang apart and gazed at the intruder, but Ailie was too much absorbed by her office to heed their looks. 'Isabel Diarmid,' she repeated with solemnity, 'what do you here?'

'I was doing nothing,' said Isabel, startled back into self-possession: 'I might say what were you doing coming upon folk like a ghost?'

'If ye mean a spirit,' said Ailie, 'it's like that I wish to come. What is this poor body that we should let it thrall us? If I had faith I might fly upon angel's wings: but oh! I'm feared it was not to serve the Lord that you two came here. Na, stand apart, and let me speak. Can ye see a' this world round about ye, and no feel that you're immortal? Isabel, the Lord would fain have ye to be His servant—and you too, young man.'

'Oh, Ailie, I'm no like you,' murmured Isabel, awed out of her first self-assertion. As for Stapyhton, he turned away with contemptuous impatience.

'What does she know about it?' he said. 'Isabel, don't you give in to this rubbish. Nobody has any right to intrude upon another. Tell her to mind her own business.' This was said in a low tone. 'Come, I'll see you home. It is getting late,' he said, aloud.

'Ah!' said Ailie, 'it's getting late, awfu' late. The blackness of the night is coming on afore the awfu' dawn. Think what it will be when you canna go home, nor find a place to hide yourself in from the brightness of His coming. Worldly wisdom would bid you join yourselves to Him now. But I'm no thinking of worldly wisdom. To stand up for Him in a dark world; to go forth like the angels, and make the way clear; to love and to bless, and to give life for death. O Isabel! O young man! I would rather that than Heaven.'

Ailie, with her young face gleaming white in the twilight, her nervous arm raised, her abstracted, humid eyes gazing into the vacant darkness, was a creature whose influence it was hard to be altogether indifferent to. Stapyhton, though he was capable of laughter at this exhibition ten minutes after, was, at least, silenced for the moment. He looked at her with that curious stupidity, in which the ordinary mind loses its faculties at the sight of such incomprehensible poetic exaltation. But Isabel, already excited, gazed upon the young prophetess with the big tears still standing in her eyes, drawn by one emotion more closely within the reach of another than she had yet been.

'I am not standing against Him! Oh, Ailie, dinna

think it! Not for the world!' she cried, dropping those two great tears; and Nature gave a little gasp and sob within her. To go forth with God's servants on this austere road, or to wander with her love in the primrose paths. If there was a choice to be made, could anyone doubt for a moment which would be the right choice? But Isabel felt herself so different from this inspired creature, so different even from Margaret, so much slighter, younger, more trifling, fond of praise and admiration, and amusement; not able to give her mind to it. And yet she was the same age as Margaret, and very little younger than Ailie. 'I am not like you,' she added, with an exquisite sense of her own imperfection, which brought other tears from those same sources. And then the feminine impulse of excuse came upon her: 'We were meaning nothing,' she said, hurriedly and humbly. 'I met Mr. Stapylton here on the hill. And it's a bonnie night. You were walking yourself, Ailie. And I'm going home. It was no harm.'

'Oh, Isabel, ye never mind how you weary the Lord with your contradictions,' said the propheticess. 'I canna see your heart like Him; but do you think I canna see what's moved ye? No the bonnie night, nor the bonnie hill, nor His presence that's brooding ower a' the world; but a lad that says he loves you, Isabel. There's nae true love that's no in Christ. If he's true, let him come to the Lord with ye this moment, afore this blessed hour is gane. Eh, my heart's troubled,' she cried, suddenly raising her arms; 'my heart's sore for you. If he comes not now, when the Lord is holding wide the door, it's that he'll never come; and then there is nothing for you but tribulation and sorrow, and lamentation and woe!'

Her voice sank as suddenly as it had risen. She pressed her hands upon her eyes, with what seemed, to the terrified Isabel, the gesture of one who shuts out something terrible from her vision.

'It is the spirit that's upon her,' Isabel murmured to herself, shivering. 'Oh, Ailie, dinna lay any curse on us, that never did you harm!'

'Curse!' she said, so low that they could scarcely hear her. 'It's no for me to curse. He had no curses in His mind, and wherefore should I? It was a cloud that passed. Isabel, bring yon lad to God, bring him to God! or he'll bring you to misery, and trouble, and pain. I am saying the truth. It's borne in on me that he'll bring you awfu' trouble. But if he comes to the Lord, ye'll break Satan's spell.'

Stapylton had turned aside in impatience, and heard nothing of this; but now he came forward and laid his hand on Isabel's arm.

'Your sister will want you,' he said, almost roughly; 'it is getting late, and this is not the place for a prayer-meeting; let me take you home.'

'Oh, Ailie, I must go home to my Margaret,' said Isabel, clasping her hands. Nature was contending, with natural awe and reverence, in the girl's mind. She did not reject the authority of the holy maid for one moment—she was ready to yield to its power; but as soon as the possibility of escape became visible to her, she seized it anxiously. 'She'll be waiting and watching for me; and you know how ill she is, and I must not keep her anxious,' pleaded Isabel; 'but I'll think upon all you say.'

'Aye, gang your ways, gang your ways,' said Ailie, turning her back upon them and dismissing them with a wave of her hand. 'Put it off to a convenient season; wait till you're hardened in your worldly thoughts, and the Lord has shut-to the door; but dinna come then and say, Give us of your oil, for there will be nane to give in that day—nane to give! The market's open the noo, and plenty to fill your vessels; but in that day there will be nane. Gang your ways to Margret, and tell her she's but a faint heart, that will lie down and die, when the Lord has that need of her for His work. I'm no saying she's not a child of God, but she has a faint heart. Gang your ways.'

'If you knew my Margaret better, ye would never dare to speak like this,' said Isabel, flushing into opposition. Staphylton drew her hand into his arm, and led her away.

'Come now,' he said, 'come while she has turned her head. I want no more sermons for my part. Your sister is waiting, Isabel—come! this is too much for me.'

Isabel suffered herself to be led across the heather, scarcely aware, in her excitement, of the close pressure with which her lover held her hand. She was angry for Margaret's sake. 'Nobody understands,' she murmured to herself. 'Nobody knows what they're saying. Her to be blamed that is the flower of all!' and turned her head, notwithstanding Staphylton's opposition, to maintain her sister's cause against her rival. But Ailie had turned away. She was going back, moving slowly among the heather, with her head bent and her eyes cast down, dreaming after her fashion, though not dreams like those of Isabel. Ailie was thinking—with much confusion of images and vagueness of apprehension, but with the exalted glow of ascetic passion—of the love of God. Poor Isabel was trembling with all the complications, the duties, and desires going contradictory to each other which adhere to the love of man.

'I suppose she must be mad,' said Stapylton; 'nothing but madness could account for it. That is what comes of prayer-meetings and such stuff. Or if she's not mad, she's cunning and likes the power.'

'And how do you think you can judge?' cried Isabel, turning upon him with the ready irritation of excitement, — 'you that know nothing of Ailie, nor of her way of living. If you were healed all in a moment and raised out of your bed, who would you believe did it but God? and could you stop to think and consider the question if you were mad or not, before you spoke. Let them judge that know!'

'Never mind,' said the young man, caressing the hand he held, 'you little fury! I don't know and I don't care; but you never thanked me for reminding you of your sister, and freeing you from that mad creature. Now she is gone there is no hurry, Isabel. It is not late, after all.'

'But Margaret will want me,' said the girl. 'No; I'll not wait, I must go home.'

'Only half an hour,' he pleaded; 'she is gone, and we have all the hill-side to ourselves.'

Isabel made no answer, but she drew her hand from his arm, and continued on her way, quickening rather than delaying her progress. He walked by her for some time, sullen and lowering. He had no comprehension of the high spirit of the girl, though he loved her. After a while he drew closer to her side, and laid his hand on her arm.

'You must do as I said, my darling, now,' he said, with real fervour. 'She is going back to her meeting, and it will be all over the parish to-morrow, that you and I were courting on the hill.'

This was the drop too much that made Isabel's cup run over. She turned upon him with eyes that flashed through her tears. 'Do you reproach me with it?' she cried—'you I did it for? Oh, if I had known! But, Mr. Stapylton, it shall be the last time.'

'Don't turn my words against me,' he said, 'don't be so peevish, so foolish, Isabel! as if it was that I meant.'

'No, I'll not be foolish,' she answered, in her heat, 'nor think shame of myself for any lad. After this ye may be sure, Mr. Stapylton, I'll never do it again.'

And then she hastened down, increasing her speed at every step, and taking no time to think. And he went sullenly by her side, not quite sure whether he loved or hated her most in her perversity. And they parted with a curt, resentful good night at the very door of the Glebe Cottage, he being too angry and she too proud to linger over the parting. It was a parting

which all the world might have witnessed. And Isabel returned to her quiet home, and Horace proceeded on to the village, each with the blaze of a lover's quarrel quivering about them. Such flames are too hot and sudden to last; but nothing had yet done so much to separate them as had this unexpected meeting with Ailie on the hill.

CHAPTER IX

THE Manse of Lochhead was not a venerable, nor a beautiful house. It had none of the associations which sometimes cluster about an English parsonage. It had not been built above twenty years, and neither its dimensions nor its appearance were in the least manorial. But it was a comfortable square house, quite large enough for the owner's wants and income, and important enough to represent the dignity of the minister, amid the humble roofs of the village. It was built on a slope of the braes which rose heathery and wild behind, and the prospect from its windows was as soft as if there had been no mountains within a hundred miles. The unequal combination of the great Highland range on one side, with the pastoral loch on the other, which gave a charm to the Glebe Cottage, was lost on this lower elevation.

The minister and the Dominie had dined together on the afternoon preceding an adjourned meeting of the Kirk Session, partly because it was habitual on the Saturday half-holiday, and partly to strengthen each other for the work before them. The hour of their dinner was four o'clock, which was as if you had said eight o'clock to that primitive community. When the meal was over they adjourned to the study to smoke the quiet pipe which was one of their bonds of union. The study was a small room with one window looking into a vast rose-bush, though peeps of the trim kitchen-garden were to be had on one side. You would have supposed that it would be natural for two such men to prefer the other side of the house, where the loch was visible, changing to a hundred opal tints as the shadows pursued the fleeting uncertain sunshine of its bosom. But they were very familiar with the view, and the little study at the back was the legitimate place for the pipe and the consultation.

'I am always afraid of these violent men,' said the minister, 'and then they are so much in earnest. Earnestness is a fine quality, no doubt, but it's very hard to keep it in bounds; and I cannot let things go

on as they are doing. They'll soon take the very work out of my hands. Already it is not me but Ailie that's at the head of the parish. And you tell me you'll give me no help?'

'It's against my principles,' said the Dominie. 'Let alone, that's ay my rule. I'm no for meddling with the development of the mind whatever form it takes. You may say it's a childish way to take up religion; but so far as it's gone there's no harm.'

'No harm! after what I told you of that scene at the Glebe, and the reprobate turned prophet,' said Mr. Lothian, angrily.

'You're very sensitive about the Glebe. If it had been any other house in the parish it would not have gone so much to your heart.'

'Well,' said Mr. Lothian, 'if I am, is it not natural? Two young creatures, so strangely situated, neither ladies, so to speak, nor simple lasses, though ladies in their hearts. And then that saint there is more like Heaven than earth. You need not smile. I do not disguise my feeling for her sister. It's a mad notion for a man of my years, but I don't disguise it. And yet it was of Margaret I thought.'

'By all I hear,' said the Dominie. 'she'll soon be out of all risk of disturbance.'

'You speak at your ease,' said the minister, rising in agitation to pace about the little room. 'When Margaret Diarmid dies it will be like the quenching of a light to me, and more than me. And how can I protect her deathbed but by putting a stop to this? Her deathbed, aye, or her very grave. Have you forgot that they go further and further every day?'

'I heard they were raising the dead,' said the Dominie, calmly. 'It's the sense o' power that leads them away.'

'And they *have* power,' said the minister, 'that is the strangest of all. Wherever it comes from, from God or the devil, they have power in their hands. I cannot deny it—I cannot understand it. Are we to believe what we see in contradiction of every instinct, or are we to hold by reason and common sense, and the truth we understand, and give facts the lie? The thought is too much for me.'

'And so you would put a stop to it?' the Dominie said, with a long puff of smoke. 'But ye'll have discussion enough before that's done. I'm more concerned for the two poor things at the Glebe. If Margaret dies, as she must die, what is to become of bonnie Isabel?'

The minister, though he was a man of vigorous frame, gave a momentary shiver, as if the cold had seized him, and then sat down again, and began to turn over his

papers, averting his face. 'You know what would become of her,' he said, 'if I had my will.'

'You would bring the lassie down here to be mistress and mair,' said Galbraith. 'I'm no blaming you, though I cannot understand it myself. You and me are more wiselike companions than her and you could ever be. If you had married in your youth, like most men, ye might have had a daughter of your own as old as she is now.'

'I've said all that to myself,' said the minister, 'a hundred times over. But it makes no difference. And I can bear whatever may happen—but my heart craves this thing from the Lord, and no other, before I die.'

'You're taking up their phraseology, for all your objections to them,' said the Dominie, with a little disdain.

'It's the phraseology of all that yearn,' cried the minister. 'Why should I not ask it of the Lord? It's a lawful thing I crave. God do so to me and more also if I would not cherish her like Christ His Church. I am old enough to be her father, as you say; but I never loved woman till now, and that is the youth of the heart. The boy there is fond of her in his way—but what sort of a way? a fancy of the moment for her sweet face. And you'll say it's more natural. But I tell you, Galbraith, there is no nature in it,' he said, once more rising in his excitement, 'to link that creature's pure soul to a hardened, heathen, self-seeking man of the world. I know the lad; he is near her in age, but in nothing else. She makes a God of him in her imagination; and when her eyes were opened, and she saw the loathly creature by her side, what would become of my Isabel? She would break her heart, and she would die.'

'Her eyes might never be opened,' said the Dominie, reflectively. 'There's no bounds to a woman's power of deceiving herself. She might make a hero of him all her days, though he was but a demon to the rest of the world. And the lad is maybe not so ill as ye say.'

'That would be worst of all—for then he would drag her down to his level, and blind her eyes to good and evil. No more,' said the minister, with a trembling voice; 'you mean, well, Galbraith, but you don't know how hard all this is to bear.'

'Maybe no—maybe no,' was the answer; 'but she might stay still at the Glebe for all I can see, as long as Jean Campbell is there to take care of her. Jean Campbell is a very decent woman. Margaret knows the worth of her, but no yon hasty lassie of an Isabel. As long as she is there there's no such desperate necessity for a change.'

'And Margaret is living, and may live,' said Mr. Lothian, sinking back into his easy chair.

The Dominie shook his head. 'If one life could stand for another, I would be sore tempted to give her mine,' he said; 'it's so little good to a man like me. I've had all that life can give. Ye may say it was a niggardly portion—daily bread and little more—no comfort to speak of, nothing like what you call success—no love beyond my mother's when I was a lad. And yet, though there's so little, I'll have all the trouble of old age and death at the hinder end. Poor thing, she would be very welcome to my life if there was any possibility of a transfer. But ye must put away your profane thoughts, and get out your books, for yonder is Andrew White coming down the brae.'

Half an hour after the Kirk Session had met. The minister took his place at the head of the table, and Mr. Galbraith, with his book of minutes opened before him, prepared to fulfil his office of Session clerk. 'I give no opinion,' he had said to the other members of the court, 'but I'm Session clerk, and I'll not neglect my duty.' There was a prayer to begin with, said by the minister, while they all stood up round the table, some with wide-open eyes and restless looks, some with bowed heads and reverence. And then the Dominie read the minutes of the last meeting, and the present one was constituted.

'To appoint the Rev. the Moderator, Mr. Andrew White, and Mr. William Diarmid to inquire into the effect of the recent movement in the parish, with power to act against all presuming and schismatical persons that may be taking authority into their own hands.'

'I have to ask the Moderator,' said the Dominie, 'if he is ready to present his report.'

'I have to make an explanation instead,' said the minister. 'We were not agreed. What William Diarmid and myself found to be unreasonable and bordering upon enthusiasm, Andrew approved of with all his heart. I will give you the result of my own inquiries without prejudice to other members of the court. In the first place, there are two or three women who, contrary to all the rules of the church, and to the Apostle's order, take upon them to speak and lead the prayers of the congregation—'

'Wi' a' respect to the minister,' said Andrew White, 'I've ae small remark to make. If it had been contrary to the order of the Apostles, wherefore does St. Paul speak of the prophetesses that were to have a veil upon their heads? There's plenty of passages I could quote to that—'

'There's ane that's decisive to my way o' thinking,

said William Diarmid. 'That women are no to speak in the church.'

'A law's one thing,' said Samuel of Ardintore. 'But an institution that's actually existing is mair to be remembered than ae mention of a rule against it, that might be nae law.'

'We can leave that point,' said the minister. 'I say it is not for edification, that Ailie Macfarlane, though I have not a word to say against her, should be led away by her zeal to take up such a position in the parish. By custom and use, if by nothing else, such things are forbidden. I have not finished. I have to object further that persons holding no office in the church, neither ministers, nor licentiates, nor elders, have likewise taken a leading part, and prayed, and exhorted, and held meetings, that so far as I can see they had no authority for. If it is sanctioned by the Kirk Session, that is a different matter. But the fact is that there are meetings taking place in every quarter of the parish without the authority of the Kirk Session, or so much as a sanction either from the elders or from me.'

'I must protest,' Moderator, said Samuel Diarmid. 'I cannot allow that the freedom of the subject is to be sae confined, that a man canna praise God with his neighbours without authority from the minister; that I canna allow.'

'Ye may enter your protest,' said the Dominie, 'but the Moderator must say out his say.'

'And now I come to what is most serious of all,' said Mr. Lothian. 'It is my opinion that these continual meetings, held by unauthorised persons, are doing harm and not good to the devout in this parish. I say nothing about the wonders that have attended the movement. These may have been delusion; but far be it from me to say that there's been deception——'

'There can be nae deception,' said Andrew White, 'in the work of the Lord.'

'Whisht, man!' said Samuel; 'the question the minister puts, if no in as many words, is, If it *is* the work of the Lord?'

'For my part,' said Mr. William, 'I've no objection to meetings now and then. It's a good way of keeping the folk alive, and keeping up their interest; and I wouldna say that Ailie Macfarlane should be put to silence. I canna think but the Spirit in her comes from above; and we a' know that she was raised up by a miracle. I wouldna put a stop to nothing. I would only give them rules to guide them, and appoint the meetings oursels; and let none take place without the minister and an elder, or one of the neighbour ministers; or if

that canna be, then twa elders, to see that things are done decently in order. That would be my proposition. No to let the parish go into ranting and violence; and at the same time, so far as it's His doing, no to strive against the Lord.'

'And are ye to dictate to the Lord what day He shall come and what day He shall bide?' said Andrew. 'If He gives a word of instruction to His servants, is the voice to be silenced by the Kirk Session? I'll never give in to that. If it's the work of man, let it come to an end; but dinna put your straw bands on the flame o' the Spirit o' God.'

'That's a' very true,' said Mr. Smeaton; 'but if the word o' the Lord was to come in the middle of the night, when the parish was sleeping, ye wouldna have the prophet rise up and ca' the honest folk out of their beds? And if they can wait till the morning—or rather till the night after, for they're a' at night these prayer-meetings—what's to hinder them to wait till anither day?'

'It's awfu' carnal reasoning,' said Samuel Diarmid; 'but it's no without meaning for them that ken no better. I wouldna object to William's proposition mysel; but I canna answer for them that feel the word burning within them that they can bide for your set days.'

'Your sawbaths and your new moons,' said Andrew. 'Na, ye might as well leemit the sun in his shining and the dew in its falling—they'll speak in season and out of season. It was for that they were sent.'

But Mr. William's conciliatory motion was at last carried after much more discussion. And the struggle did not break the bonds of amity which united the little assembly: Samuel Diarmid volunteered not only his advice, but a cart of guano to a certain field on the glebe, which, in his opinion, was not producing such a crop as it ought. 'You're no a married man yoursel, and it's of less importance to ye,' Samuel said, 'but I canna bide to see land lying idle no more than men.' And Andrew White announced the intention of the mistress to send the minister a skep of honey from the hills. 'Ye keep nae bees yoursel, which is a pity,' said the elder, always with that gentle touch of admonition with which the rural Scotch personage naturally addresses his clergyman. They parted in the soft gloaming, while still there was light enough to guide them on their respective ways. Mr. Smeaton, the stock farmer, had his horse waiting at John Macwhirter's; and the others dropped in there on their homeward way to fight the battle over once more; all but Samuel and Andrew, who climbed the hill together to the mill, where the former was to take a bed for the night, his house being

at the furthest limits of the parish, on the other side of 'the braes.'

'Yon was grand about the minister's sermons, to his face,' said Mr. Smeaton, as they went over the whole discussion in the smithy.

'Ay, man; did they gang into that subject? I'm real glad o't,' said John Macwhirter; 'he's a learned man and a clever man, but he's as fu' of doctrines as an egg's fu' of meat. He's no half practical enough for me.'

Thus it will be seen opinions differed widely even on the primitive shores of the Loch.

CHAPTER X

THE next day, which was Sunday, carried the news of this decision through all the parish. It was a bright morning after the rain, one of those radiant pathetic days which are so usual in the Highlands. The women came across the hill with their dresses 'kilted' and pinned up to preserve them from the moisture which glistened on the heather. The birch-trees hung their glistening branches out to the sun. The paths ran with the recent rain; and at the same time the sun shone brilliantly upon everything reflected from the dazzling mirror of the Loch, where not a boat or sign of life disturbed the Sabbatical repose. The gathering of the kirk-going crowd is always a pretty sight. Dissent scarcely existed in those days in such rural places. Groups came gathering along all the paths; the village emptied itself of all but an occasional housewife, or the old grannie too deaf or feeble to join the congregation. While the cracked and miserable bell tingled forth its ten minutes from the tower, the women and children poured into the church, while the men lingered in a crowd in the churchyard waiting till the tingle should be over. This was the habit of the Loch; but to-day these groups were animated by a livelier interest than usual. There was no question of crops outside among the men, nor of measles and whooping-cough among the women rustling and whispering in their pews. 'Have ye heard the news that the meetings are stopped?' 'I have heard it, but I canna believe it.' 'I'm very thankful, for there was nae saying what they might have turned to;' or, 'I'm awfu' sorry, and such good as they were doing in the parish.' 'But the thing is, will Ailie submit, or Mr. John?' These were the words that were whispered from one to another as the bell jingled forth its summons to church. The two thus conjoined had

come to be regarded universally as the leaders of the movement; they were patronised and supported by many parochial personages of weight, but in the end it was evidently they who must decide.

Mr. Lothian's sermon, as was expected, bore some reference to the momentous crisis of affairs. With that natural perversity to which even the best of men yield like their inferiors, the minister's sermon, instead of being as Samuel Diarmid had suggested, 'rousing,' was calmer than usual in its tone; and he was so bold, almost rash, all things taken into consideration, as to take his text from the strange description in the Old Testament of those prophets whom Saul joined in their wild rapture of inspiration. By a rare self-denial he refrained from absolutely quoting the words which were on the lips of all his parishioners. 'Is Saul also among the prophets?'—but dwelt upon the wild outburst which had so little effect upon the condition of the people, and upon the sorrowful calm of Samuel to whom no such ardour of religious excitement seemed to have been given. 'From all we can see,' said the minister, 'he stood and looked on, not disapproving, but well aware in his heart how little was to be expected from such bursts of enthusiasm.' The attention in the church was absorbing. Sometimes there would be a stolen glance at Ailie, who listened like the rest with profound attention, a gleam of colour now and then flitting over her visionary face; and he was happy who could obtain from his seat a glimpse of the Ardnamore pew, with Mr. John's dark head relieved against the high back. He sat alone, and was very conspicuous in the front of the gallery, and at any time he would have been notable among the shrewd, expressive, peasant countenances round him. Something of the finer and more subtle varieties of expression given by education and intercourse with the world, and—though he was at best but a country squire—something of the flavour of race was in the passionate, dark face, fixed upon the preacher with a defiant attention which seemed likely at any moment to burst into utterance. People said he had actually risen to speak when Mr. Lothian hastily gave the benediction and concluded the service. There had not been so exciting a 'diet of worship' on the Loch in the memory of man. The congregation, as it dispersed, broke into little groups, discussing the one subject from every point of view.

'I wonder how he daur speak, with her vonder before him like one of the saints, and sae humble for a' her gifts.' 'And, eh, I wonder how a young lass could sit and listen to a' yon from the minister and still bide steadfast in her ain way, said the gossips. 'But I canna

haud with that way o' finding fault with Scripture,' said one of the fathers of the village. 'A' Scripture's written for our instruction; and wha gave ony man authority to judge the auld prophets as if they were not examples every ane?'

'It's a fashion nowadays,' said another. 'I've heard some o' them as hard on Jacob, honest man, as if he had been a neebor lad; and as for King Dawvid and his backslidings——'

'Had he been a neebor lad, as ye say, he had never come within my door,' cried Jenny Spence, 'and seeing the Lord puts them to shame Himsel, wherefore should we set up for making them perfect? And, bless me, if ye think of a wheen naked men, tearing their claes, and ranting afore decent folk——'

'Haud your tongue, Jenny!' said John, 'or speak o' things ye understand.'

'If I didna understand better nor you lads that never take thought of naething, it would be queer to me,' retorted Jenny. 'What wi' your work, and your clavers, and Luckie Bisset ower the hill——'

'Whisht! whisht! woman, it's the Sawbath-day,' said an older neighbour; and then the original subject was resumed.

Among the many church-going parties there was the habitual one from the Glebe. Jean Campbell, in her best attire, the heavy, well-preserved, but somewhat rusty weeds which became the Captain's widow was an imposing figure. Her crape was rather brown, but it was a more perfect evidence of rank to her than silk or satin. Her fresh, comely face looked out pleasantly from the white crimped borders, and overshadowing pent-house of black, which marked her condition. Not a new-made widow on all the Loch had deeper weeds than she; though Isabel by her side in her grey gown and with her rose ribbons looked fresh as the day.

Jean had many salutations to make as they issued out of church; and pretty Isabel, who was very conscious of the little step of superiority in her position which make her notice of her rustic neighbours, 'a compliment,' distributed her little greetings like a princess, shyly looking out for Miss Catherine, with whom she was wont to walk home as far as the gate of Lochhead, thus separating herself from the common level on which her stepmother stood.

'Look well at Isabel of the Glebe as you pass her; you maun make your new frock like yon,' an anxious mother would say to her daughter. 'They say she's aye meeting that young Stapylton on the braes, but he daurna come near her on the Sabbath-day.' 'Eh, no, I'm thinking he wouldna have the face, and her waiting for Miss

Catherine.' Isabel was softly conscious of the comments made upon her. When Margaret and she were children, standing together waiting for their father on the same spot ten years before, the same looks had been turned upon them; the same curious observations made on their dress and their 'manners;' and 'Ye dinna see the wee ladies behaving like that,' had been a common admonition to the unruly children around.

'I hope you are all well,' she said to Jenny Spence with the pretty 'English,' which the Loch admired, and which, to tell the truth, Isabel herself often forgot, except on those Sabbatical occasions. And Jenny felt the compliment of the salutation and the pride of the connection so profoundly that she rushed into eager tender inquiries about Margaret, overwhelming the girl with her reverential affection. While she stood, with smiling dignity, listening to Jenny Spence, another little incident occurred that increased still further her importance with the crowd. Ailie Macfarlane was not in the habit of speaking to anyone as she left the church. She would pass through them all with her little Bible folded in her hands, her eyes either cast down or gazing rapt into the air, while everybody made way for her. But when she approached Isabel on this memorable day, Ailie paused. She took one of her hands from her Bible, and suddenly laid it upon Isabel's. It was cold; and the girl, who had not expected it, made a little start backward from the touch.

'It's like ice to your warm blood,' said Ailie; 'and so am I to you. But I'm no acting on my ain notion. Isabel Diarmid, promise me you'll come to the prayer-meeting the morn.'

'O Ailie, how can I promise?' said Isabel in dismay, 'and Margaret so ill.'

'Dinna set that up for an excuse. I'm bidden to ask you by them that will have no excuse,' said Ailie. 'To her ain Master she standeth or falleth—I'm no judging Margaret. But, Isabel, I'm bidden to summon you.'

'I cannot leave my sister,' faltered Isabel, raising her eyes to the crowd with a mute appeal for defence.

'You can leave her for the hill,' said Ailie, very low; and then she added hurriedly, 'It's no me that speaks. There's awfu' trouble and sorrow in your way, and you're but a soft feckless thing to bear it. Come to the prayer-meeting the morn.'

It was just at this moment that Miss Catherine appeared. Isabel's eyes had been diverted for the moment away from the church, and she had not seen the approach of her friend; who laid her hand upon the girl's shoulder as Ailie repeated her invitation.

'Ailie Macfarlane,' Miss Catherine said, while Isabel started nervously at the unexpected touch. 'You are not to bid her to your meetings; she is too young, and she is my kinswoman, and I cannot let her go.'

'If she was the queen's kinswoman I would bid her,' said Ailie. 'What are your ranks and degrees to the Spirit of the Lord? I'm offering her far more than you can offer her, though you're a lady and me but a simple lass. Now that persecution has come upon us, as was to be looked for, it canna be but the Spirit will be poured out double. It's out of love to Isabel I ask her, that she may taste the first-fruits and be kent for ane of the chosen. Who are you that would stand between the Lord and His handmaid? I'm freed from earthly bonds this day. Isabel, I'll say nae mair to ye; but tell Margaret I bid her arise and meet me—for the corn is whitening to the harvest; and come yoursel.'

When she had said these words she passed on with the same rapt look as before, speaking to no one, seeing no one. The people round had gathered close to hear what she said, and dispersed slowly out of her path as she turned, making way for her reluctantly, and full of curiosity. Some of the women even plucked at her dress as she passed. 'Eh, Ailie! speak one word. Will't bring judgment on the parish?' said one anxious voice. But Ailie made no reply. She glided away from them, with that directness and silent speed of motion which gives a certain spiritual and ghostly air to the very movements of the abstracted and impassioned.

Isabel had forgotten her simple vanity. She stood trembling, with tears in her eyes, by Miss Catherine's side, not even capable of pride in being thus adopted as the special charge of the great lady of the parish.

'She says I'm coming to grief and trouble,' sobbed poor Isabel. 'Oh, is it my Margaret she means?'

'Hush!' said Miss Catherine drawing Isabel's hand through her own; 'you must not cry before all these folk. Come and tell me all that ails you. Is Margaret worse that you tremble so? and what can that poor thing know about it more than you or me? Can she know as well as Margaret herself?'

'But if it was true that she had the Spirit?' faltered Isabel through her tears. 'And oh, Miss Catherine, it goes to my heart what she aye says—if Margaret had but faith!'

'Margaret has all the faith a Christian woman wants—he you sure of that,' said Miss Catherine, with impatience; 'and I wish the minister had taken order sooner to put a stop to all this. But, Isabel, there might be worse things in your way than the grief we all share. My dear, I

have been wanting long to speak to you. Put Ailie and her raving out of your mind, and come cannily up to Lochhead with me.'

'Margaret will want me,' said Isabel, awakening suddenly to a sense that admonitions of another kind were hanging over her.

'I'll not keep you long,' said Miss Catherine, 'and Jean shall say where you are. Good-day, Mrs. Diarmid. I am taking Isabel with me to have a talk. Give Margaret my love, and I'll walk up to see her this afternoon and bring her sister back. There's no change?'

'I canna say there's ony change, Miss Catherine,' said Jean, divided between the melancholy meaning of what she said and the glory of this address; for even Miss Catherine, punctilious as she was in giving honour where honour was due, seldom addressed her by the dignified title of Mrs. Diarmid; 'but she's aye wearing away, and weaker every day.'

'The Lord help us, there's nothing else to be looked for,' said Miss Catherine, sadly. And Isabel, who had regained her composure to some extent, fell weeping once more, silently leaning on her friend's arm. There was nothing more said till they descended the brae, and made their way through the village. The Loch had never been trained to the custom of curtsying to the lady of the manor. The groups stood aside with kindly looks to let her pass, and here and there a man better bred than usual took off his hat, but the salutations in general were rather nods of friendly greeting and smiles that broadened the honest rural faces than more reverential servilities. 'How are all at home, John?' Miss Catherine said, in her peremptory way as she passed. 'How is all with ye, Janet?' And then there was a needful pause, and the story of the children's recovery from some childish epidemic would be told, or of the letter from 'the lads' in Canada, or of family distress and anxiety. When they were quite free of these interruptions, which had once more the effect of bringing composure to Isabel, whose April tears dried quickly, and whose heart could not be coerced out of hope, Miss Catherine turned to the special charge she had taken upon her.

'My dear,' she said, 'I am going to be a cruel friend. I have made up in my mind all manner of hard things to say to you, Isabel. You are not to take them ill from me. We're kindred far removed, but yet there's one drop's blood between you and me, and I know nobody on the Loch that wishes you well more warmly. Will you let me speak as if I were your mother? Had she been living it would have been her place.'

'Miss Catherine,' said Isabel, with a thrill of nervous impatience, a sudden heat flushing to her face, 'how can you ask it? Ye have always said whatever you liked to me.'

'And you think I've sometimes been hard upon you?' said Miss Catherine. 'Well, we'll not argue. Your mother was younger than me, Isabel, and she had no near friends any more than you. If she had had a father or a brother to take care of her, she never would have married Duncan Diarmid. I am meaning no offence to the Captain. He did very well for himself, and a man that makes his way is always to be respected; but he was a different man from what your mother thought when she married him, and her life was short, and far from happy. She was a sweet, wilful tender, hot-tempered thing, just like you.'

'Eh, I'm no wilful!' said Isabel, thrilling in every vein with the determination to resist all advice that could be given to her. They were almost alone on the green glistening road which wound round the head of the Loch, and the water rippled up upon the pebbles, and flashed like a great mirror in the sunshine. The girl's heart rose with the exhilaration of the brightness.

'Your mother would take no advice,' said Miss Catherine, 'and she died at five-and-twenty, and left you, two poor babies, without a mother to guide you in the world.'

'But, oh, it was not her fault she died,' cried Isabel. 'Folk die that are happy too.'

'I'll tell you what it was,' said Miss Catherine; 'not to put you against your father. He never pretended to more than he was. Duncan was aye honest, whatever else. But your mother saw qualities in him that no mortal could see. And when the hasty thing saw her idol broken, her heart broke too; and you're like her—too like, Isabel.'

'For one thing at least, I'm wronging nobody; and why should you say all this to me?' cried the girl all flushed and resentful, and yet struggling with her tears.

'How can I tell what you might be tempted to do? Margaret Diarmid—that's your mother—gave me her word she would take time and think, and the very next Sabbath she was cried in the kirk! Isabel, I said I would be cruel. Do you know, do you ever think, what's coming upon you, bairn?'

Isabel made no answer—her resentment could not stand against this solemnity of tone. She raised her eyes to Miss Catherine as one who awaits the sentence of fate.

'While you are running about, out and in, like a

butterfly or a bird, and singing your songs, and working at your seam, and meeting strange folk upon the braes'—said Miss Catherine with emphasis. 'I am not blaming you, even for the last. But all this time there's coming a day when you will be left alone in the world, Isabel. Your bit cottage will still be yours—so to speak a home; but a home that's empty and desolate, what is that? And none to lean on, none to advise you, none to be your guide—silence in the chambers, and cold on the hearth; and you no better than a bairn, used from your cradle to lean on her and turn to her: what will you do when you are alone in the world?'

'Oh, my Margaret!' cried Isabel, drawing her hand from Catherine's arm and bursting into a passion of tears. They were within the gate at Lochhead, and there was no one by to see the girl's weeping, which was beyond control. She had been told of it again and again, and realised it to some degree, but never until now had brought her imagination to bear on the life that remained for herself after her sister was gone. Miss Catherine was softened by the violence of her emotion. She took Isabel into her arms and let fall a tear or two out of her old eyes, to mingle with those scorching drops that came wrung out of the other's very heart.

'Oh, you are cruel, cruel,' cried Isabel, struggling out of her embrace; 'I will die too! I canna bear it; I canna bear it! It is more than I can bear.'

Then Miss Catherine led her, blind with her tears, to a grassy seat hid among the trees, and sat down by her and did her best to administer comfort. 'Isabel, you know well it must be so,' she said at length, with some severity. 'It cannot be that you have found it out for the first time to-day.'

'Oh, do not speak to me,' cried Isabel; 'how can ye dare to say it is to be, when God could raise her up in a moment like Ailie? And there was Mary Diarmid down the Loch that was—dying—that's what they said—and even she got the turn. Oh, do not speak to me, God is not cruel as you say.'

All these reproaches Miss Catherine bore, sitting compassionately by her victim until the force of her passion was spent; and when Isabel, faint and exhausted, like a creature in a dream, could resist no longer, she resumed where she had left off.

'My dear, I am thinking what is to become of you when this comes to pass—and so does Margaret. Bless her, she thinks of you night and day; and many a talk we have about you, Isabel, when you're little thinking of us. There is one good man in the parish that loves you well——'

'I want no love,' answered the girl, almost sullenly. 'Oh, Miss Catherine, don't speak like this to me.'

'But I am speaking for Margaret's sake. There is one that would be a comfort and strength and blessing to any woman. And there is the other lad. Isabel! your father was rough and wild, and not a match for my kinswoman Margaret Diarmid; but he had always a heart. This lad has little heart. If you but heard how he can speak of them you hold most dear——'

'Miss Catherine,' said Isabel, with a voice of despair, starting to her feet, 'I will run home to Margaret; I can bear no more.'

CHAPTER XI

THE prayer-meeting on Monday evening was the most exciting 'occasion' that had been known on the Loch for years. At this the decision of the prophets would be made known, as the decision of the Kirk Session had already been. It was moonlight, that great necessity of all rural evening gatherings; and from all the corners of the parish came curious hearers eager to know what was the next step to be taken. Mr. William's wife from Wallacebrae was even one of the audience, undeterred by her husband's objections. 'How can I say I'm against them, and my ain wife led away to hear?' he said. 'Hoot away! No to hear them, but to see what they will do,' said Mrs. Diarmid; 'am I to be led away?'

And Isabel, who had begun to place a certain vague hope in Ailie, after the struggle she had gone through the day before, had made up her mind to obey the injunction so strongly laid upon her, and to go also. 'I would like to hear what they say, and what they are going to do,' she said to her sister, in almost the same words which the mistress at Wallacebrae had given as her excuse, owning no sympathy with the enthusiasts, but simple curiosity.

'But you must not go to hear the Word of God as if it were a play,' said Margaret, 'it is always the word of God whoever speaks it. If you are but going out of curiosity, Isabel, it would be better to bide with me.'

'I would rather stay with you than do anything else in the world; if you would but stay with me,' said Isabel, with wistful looks, 'and try, maybe, what Ailie said?'

'Ye vex me,' said the dying girl. But the tone was so soft that it could scarcely be called a reproach. And yet Margaret felt that to remain with her in the unbroken quiet of the long evening was more than Isabel could now

bear. There were the braes with all their wistful delights to tempt her forth, and her own unquiet, restless heart, tortured by doubt and grief, and distracting gleams of the future; and there was perhaps the lover whom in her heart she yearned for and yet had begun to flee.

'*She is going,*' Isabel said again, after a pause, 'and you are always so kind, you say ye want for nothing, Margaret. It is not for curiosity. They told me I was warned by name. No, I am not going away after them; I was thinking of different things.'

'Ever of that miracle?' said Margaret, with a faint smile, 'which will never come. If it was not for you, Isabel it would be a miracle to me to be away. But we will no speak of that; leave little Mary with me if you will go—not that I want anybody, I am real well to-night, and no breathless to speak of; but it's ill for the bairn.'

'Oh, Margaret! I feel whiles as if you thought more of that bairn than of your own sister!' said Isabel, with all the hot jealousy of a heart which felt itself divided and guilty.

'*She is my sister,*' said Margaret, softly; 'but nobody could ever be like my Bell; it would be strange if you needed to be told that now.'

And then the impatient, impetuous girl wept and upbraided herself. 'Oh, I am not myself, I am not myself!' she said; 'I'm all wrong; it's as if I could not submit to God.'

'My bonnie Bell!' said Margaret, wistfully, gazing at the perplexing creature, whom she could not understand, and laying her hand upon the bowed-down head. A little sigh of weariness mingled with her perplexity. She had come to that point when peace is demanded by worn-out nature; and those tumults were too much for her. 'Put on something warm,' she said, 'and tell *her* she is not to go too far in; but be home soon and let me hear what's passed. If Ailie speaks to you, tell her I'm real well and content.'

'Will I tell her you are better? Oh, will I say you're mending, Margaret?'

'Ye cannot think how you vex me,' said poor Margaret, sighing, 'you more than all. Why should I mend? I am far on my journey now, and why should I come back just to tread all the weary way over again another time? Tell Ailie I'm winning home. The road is uphill, and maybe the last bit is the steepest; but I am real content. If you will not say that, say nothing, Isabel. And if you are going, it is time for you to go.'

'But I'll go and leave you angry, Margaret,' cried Isabel; 'angry and vexed at me?'

'No, no; no angry,' said Margaret, wearily. The

nectic spot had come into her cheek. She laid her head back on the cushions with again a weary sigh. What wonder if she longed for the end—she to whom life had no longer anything to give? She closed her eyes for a moment, and Isabel, feeling more guilty than ever, stole away to warn her stepmother, and to tie on her cottage bonnet and great grey cloak. 'You'll watch Margaret that she wants nothing; but you'll not speak to her to wear her out,' she said to little Mary, ever jealous of her sister's love.

The schoolhouse was all dark when the crowd reached it. Instead of the usual preparation for them the door was locked, and the Dominie stood on the step, looking down upon the dark groups as they began to arrive and gather round, with the patience of the rural mind. 'The door's no open yet.' 'The lights are no lightet.' 'I tell't ye, for a' your grumblin', we would be here soon enough.' 'It's no often Ailie's late.' 'And what's the Dominie waiting there like a muckle ghost,' murmured the crowd.

Mr. Galbraith, to tell the truth, was in no desirable position. He had the key in his hand, but that could not be seen; and he was charged with the dangerous mission of temporising, and commissioned to coax the multitude out of their excitement, and persuade them to go quietly home. If he did not succeed, there was always the key to fall back upon. 'In the last place, if better is not to be made of it, I'll let them have their will,' he had said. Of all offices in the world the least satisfactory. Already he had begun to see that it was a mistake, but it was now too late to withdraw. 'They should have found a' dark and been treated to no explanations,' he said to himself, as he stood with his back against the door and gazed on them. A mob is not an easy thing to deal with in any circumstances; and a religious mob, spurred up to the highest point of spiritual excitement, is the most dangerous of all. Had it not been for the large leaven of mere curiosity which kept down the pitch of agitation, things might have gone badly for the Dominie. He cleared his throat a great many times before he screwed himself to the point of addressing them. The prophets themselves had not yet appeared, and if it might be possible to dismiss the people before the arrival of their leaders, a great point would be gained. Spurred by this thought he at last broke the silence.

'My friends,' said the Dominie; and there was an immediate hush of the scraping feet, and the coughs and whispers of impatience. The moon had gone in and all was dark, so that he could distinguish none of the faces

turned to him, and felt, as few orators can do, the sense of that vague abstraction, a crowd unbroken by the glance of any exceptional sympathetic face. 'My friends, I'm here to say a word to you from the Kirk Session. Those that are put over ye in the Lord have taken much thought and counsel together to see what's best to be done. I am reflecting upon nobody. It's not my place to tell you who you are to hear, or when you are to forbear. But I appeal to those that are heads of families if there have not been too many of these meetings? The human mind is not equal to such a strain. I've studied it all my life, and ye may believe me when I speak. There must be a Sabbath for the body, and the mind's mair delicate than the body. But any night, every night, have ye no assembled here, to listen to the most agitating addresses, given, I do not gainsay, with what is more touching than oratory, with the whole conviction of the soul. My friends, ye have but a delicate machine to manage. Your minds are no like your ploughs that are simple things to guide. They're like the new-fangled steam-engines, full of delicate bits of wheels, and cranks, and corners——'

At this moment a figure glided up to him out of the crowd. The Dominie divined at once whose were those swift and noiseless steps, and felt that his oratory and his object were defeated. She came and placed herself beside him holding up her hand, and at that moment the moon burst forth and shone full upon Ailie's face, which in that light was white as marble, with the full large lambent eyes, almost projected from it, looking out upon the eager spectators.

'Come na here with your carnal wisdom,' said Ailie, putting up her hand as if to stop him. 'Oh come na here! What's learning, and knowledge, and a' your science afore the fear of the Lord? And how dare ye stop His servants from constant prayer to Him, and saving souls? Will ye quench the Spirit, O man, with your vain words? Think ye we're sae little in earnest that we want biggit walls to shelter us, or your fine candles to give us light? The Lord is our light,' cried the prophetess, stretching out her hand towards the moon that shone full upon her. And there was a rustle and stir in the crowd which told the instant response of the audience.

The Dominie's own feelings were not beyond the reach of such an apostrophe. He moved uneasily from one foot to another, and began to fumble in his coat-pocket for the key, the last concession which he was prepared to make.

'I am saying nothing against that, my good lass,' he

said; 'not a word am I saying, but that for you and the like of you there's too much of this; and that's the Kirk Session's opinion. You shall have plenty of opportunity—plenty of occasion, but, my dear, for the sake of your own life, and for all the rest of them, not every night—'

'Friends,' said another voice suddenly from another quarter, 'it is nothing wonderful if persecution has come upon us. I have expected it from the first. The hand of this world is against the servants of God, and ever will be. We are driven forth like our forefathers to the hill-side. The Church has shut to her doors against us. I told you it would be so. I told you a lukewarm, unawakened Church would never bear that within her bosom that was a reproach to her. And what of that?' the speaker went on with growing excitement, 'there is God's word that they cannot drive us out of, and God's lights that He has set for us in the heavens, and His ear that is ever open, and His hand that is ready to save. On your knees, my brethren! What hinders that we should pray to Him here?'

Then there arose a murmur among the crowd: 'It's Mr. John!' 'Eh, it's the days of the persecution come back.' 'We'll no thole't.' 'Who's the minister or the Kirk Session either to stand up against the Christian people?' 'And quench the Spirit?' cried a voice above the rest; 'do they mind that's the unpardonable sin?'

Mr. Galbraith made vain efforts to speak; the murmurs rose higher and higher, and began at last to direct themselves to him. 'Is the like of that weirdless Dominie to stand against ye a', feeble loons?' cried a woman. 'Wha's he that he should daur to stand against us?' 'Let me at him!' 'Eh, lads, canny, canny, he's an auld man.' Such were the cries of indignation and alarm that rose in the stillness. The remnant of people who had been left in the village came rushing forth to see what was the matter. Mr. Lothian was at the other end of the parish, but young Stapylton, who had just returned from a fruitless ramble on the braes, came lounging to the Manse gate. The moon went suddenly behind a cloud, leaving all that darkling mass confused and struggling. Then it was that the Dominie made himself heard. 'Lads,' he shouted, his voice reaching the entire crowd though he was himself unseen, 'I've trained ye, and I'm reaping the credit. If it was for your sakes ye might tear the auld man in pieces before you should have your will. Dinna think ye can frighten me. If I give the key to Ailie, it is for the women's sake; and the bairns. Women, are ye mad that ye bring bairns here?'

'It's because their souls are mair precious to us than a' the world,' cried some mother in the crowd. 'It's little enough you teach them,' cried another. 'Where would they hear the Gospel if no in the meetings?' 'No in the kirk, wi' a moderate minister and his moral essays.' 'And now when we've found the Word of God ye would drive us to the hill-side to seek it.' 'They would drive us into the Loch if they had their will,' cried the crowd.

Isabel Diarmid, with all her sensibilities in arms, humiliated to the dust, indignant, terrified, stood trembling in the midst of this seething, agitated mass, thrust about by its sudden movements, ready to cry or to faint, feeling her self-respect for ever lost, no better than 'a common lass' among the crowd. She felt herself drawn along by the movement of the people round her rushing in one body for the door, which, with much noise of the key in the keyhole, had at length been opened. Clinging to her stepmother, vainly resisting, overwhelmed with shame, she felt herself swept out of the fresh air into the dark schoolroom no longer an individual with a will of her own, but a helpless portion of the crowd. When the first pioneers succeeded in lighting one miserable candle to throw a glimmer over the scene, its feeble rays gave no one any assistance, but only cast a wretched twinkle of revelation, showing the struggle—the benches pushed aside by the blind, uncertain crowd; the throng pouring in darkling through the black doorway. By degrees a few other feeble twinkles began to glitter about the room, and the people subsided into seats, with much commotion and struggling.

The strange gloom, the flicker of the candles, the eager look of all those faces turned towards the Dominie's table, at which stood Mr. John; the thrill of excitement and expectation among them, overcame Isabel's susceptible nature. All her shame disappeared before the extraordinary fire of popular emotion which she had suddenly caught. If she could be said to have hated any man in the world, Mr. John would have been the man. And yet she sat and gazed at him as if he had been an angel of fate.

'It's come at last,' he said; 'my brothers, I've been looking for it long. None can live godly in Christ Jesus but suffer persecutions. And Satan has found his instruments. Two nights had not gone from your first meeting in this place when the Lord showed me how it would be. But are we to give up our sacred standard because the heathen rage and the people imagine a vain thing—ave, a vain thing! As well might they bind the Loch that the flood should not come up. Has not the

Spirit of the Lord come like a flood upon this parish; and they try to stop Him with a key turned in the lock and a shut door! But the Lord has opened us a door, great and effectual. Praise Him, my friends, that He has given us the victory. The horse and his rider has He overthrown in the sea——'

'But this is awfu' irregular,' cried another personage, who rose suddenly out of the darkness, and was discovered after a time to be Samuel Diarmid the elder. He came out of the front row, which was merely a range of dark heads to the people behind, and stepped before the prophet with a small Bible in his hand. My friends,' he said, 'though Mr. Galbraith took upon him to shut ye out o' this public place belonging to the parish, I am here in my capacity as an elder o' this parish to preside among ye. I hope there's none here will dispute my right. We'll open the meeting in the usual way by singing to the praise of God in the Psalms; and after the meeting's lawfully constituted, ye shall hear whatever word the Lord's servant may have to say.'

At this announcement, there arose a sudden rustle and resolute thumbing of the Psalms, which were attached to everybody's Bible. The audience found the place conscientiously, though only a few could by any possibility see the page. Samuel himself led the singing, standing with his book in his hand, and his figure swaying to and forward with the cadence of the 'tune;' and seated in darkling rows, with their books held in every possible slope to reach the light, the audience lifted up their voices and sang one of those strange measures at which musicians stand aghast. Isabel sang it with all her heart. No criticism occurred to her. Her ear was not shocked by the false notes, the curious growls and creaks of utterance around her.

And then she closed her little Testament, and stood up, covering her face with her hands for the prayer. It was the prayer of a man having authority which Samuel Diarmid poured forth; and in that darkness through which no man could make out his neighbour's face, the crowd stood and listened. His prayer was a kind of liturgy in itself. He prayed for her Sacred Majesty, as is the custom in Scotland, and for the Government and magistrates, and every class of men who could be put together in a general supplication. There was something half-comic, half-solemn in his formality; but it did not strike his audience as anything peculiar. They drew a long breath when it was ended, with conscious but unexpressed relief.

'He's ay awfu' dry and fusionless in his prayers,' Jean whispered to Isabel, 'but wait till it's Ailie's turn.'

When they had all resumed their seats, the speaker opened his Bible and began to read 'a chapter.' For some part of this, all went on with perfect quiet and decorum. You might have been in the kirk, Isabel said to herself, had it not been so dark, and the people so thronged together. The thought was passing through her mind when all at once a crash of sound startled her. She rose to her feet in wonder, gazing where it might come from; but to her amazement no one else moved. Heads were raised a little, the attention of the mass was quickened, but nobody except herself thought, as Isabel did, that something terrible had happened. Who could it be that dared to interrupt the worship? But while she gazed and listened, there suddenly arose another sound; this time it was a voice distinct and musical. And Isabel, relieved, sat down again, and lent an attentive ear. The next moment she was once more on her feet in a confusion too great to be restrained. 'What is she saying? what is she saying?' she whispered in her stepmother's ear. Jean, habituated to the wonder, was scandalised by this excitement. She twitched at Isabel's cloak to drag her back to her seat. 'Whisht! sit down. It's nothing but the tongue,' she said. The girl strained her eyes upon the listening crowd, but no one was moved as she was. She dropped back appalled into her seat. It was Ailie who spoke; and in the intense silence and darkness poured forth an address full of that eloquence of intonation and expression which is perceptible in every language. 'Is it Latin? is it Hebrew?' Isabel asked herself, moved by wonder, and awe, and admiration, into an indescribable excitement. When the voice suddenly paused, and changed and turned into ordinary utterance, there was a little rustle of roused attention among the crowd; but Isabel leant back upon the wall and burst into silent tears. The excitement had been more than she could bear. When she came to herself the same fresh youthful voice was making the room ring, and compelled her attention. It was like bringing down to ordinary life the vague grace of youthful fancies. When she awoke from the surprise of her excitement, and found that Ailie was speaking so as everybody understood her, the wonder and the mystery were gone.

'O ye of little faith,' cried Ailie, 'wherefore do ye doubt? are ye feared to go forth from the fine kirk and the comfortable meeting to the hills and the fields? Where was it He went to commune with His Father, that is our example? was it to biggit land, or lightsome town? No; but to the cauld hill-side in the dark, where nothing was but God and the stars looking down out of the lonesome sky. O the puir creatures we are—the

poor creatures! Think ye it's for the good of this bit corner of the earth that He has given me strength to rise up from my bed, and poured forth the gifts o' tongues, and teaching and prophesying upon this parish? I was like you. He knows how laith—laith I was to come out of the kirk I was christened in, and open my heart to the weary, wanting world. But I take ye a' to witness it's no us that have begun. They have lifted up their hands against the ark of the Lord. They've tried their best to stop us in our ministry and in the salvation of souls. They've scoffed and they've said where are the signs o' His appearing. Look round ye, friends, and see. Me that never learned more than my Bible—I speak wi' tongues—I see the things that are to come. Think ye that is for nought? It fell on your sons and your daughters in your very presence and is that for nought? Bear ye witness, friends, that I take up my commission this night. Go forth into the world and preach the Gospel to every creature, that is the command that's given to me. Throw off your bonds, ye that sleep—arise and let us go forth! It's no a question o' a parish, or o' a village, or o' a kirk or a meeting, but of His coming to be prepared and the world to be saved.'

Whether this wild but sweet voice had come to a natural pause, or whether it was suddenly interrupted and broken by the same extraordinary burst of sounds which had been heard before, Isabel, terrified out of all her self-control, could not tell. She gave a suppressed scream, as Mr. John stood up with his rigid arms stretched out and his features convulsed with the passion of utterance whatever it was. The sound which had alarmed her came from him, bursting from his lips as if by some force which had no relation to his own will or meaning. The cry came from him like the groanings and mutterings of a volcano, moved by some unseen power. Isabel clung to her stepmother in her terror and hid her face in her hands.

Such sounds echoing through the darkened room, over all those hushed and eager listeners, were impressive enough to overawe any lively imagination; and it was with her head bent down on Jean Campbell's shoulder, and her eyes closely shut, that Isabel heard the inarticulate horror change into words.

'Hear the voice of the handmaid of the Lord,' cried Mr. John. 'The Lord sent His servant to her with a word from Him, saying, Go forth and convert the world; but she would not listen. She said, Who am I that I should go forth and preach? Thy handmaid is a child, she said. But lo! the Lord himself hath taught her. Not to you only, O people of Loch Diarmid; you have

had the first-fruits, but the ingathering is not yet! Like those that have not long to be with you, we turn and cry—Repent! Repent, and be converted. You have waited long. And God has sent you prophets, miracles, and wonders, in your midst. And lo! your moment of privilege is nearly over, and He sends His servants forth. Repent! Oh, that my voice were a trumpet, that it might ring into your hearts! Oh, that it were as a rushing, mighty wind to sweep you to the Lord! We are going forth in His name. We are going out upon the world. Give us first-fruits—first-fruits for the Lord! Let us pray! Let us pray! Let us pray!’

Then the darkling mass rose to their feet, and the enthusiast poured forth his prayer. Isabel could scarcely restrain herself from joining in the subdued outcries round her. By degrees, time and place, and all mortal restrictions, vanished from her excited mind. What roused her was Ailie’s voice, once more soft, pleading, sympathetic. A voice that calmed her wild emotions, and brought her back in some degree to herself.

‘I have wondered and wondered, and asked of the Lord,’ said Ailie, ‘what for His gift of speaking wi’ tongues should have come to me—me that kent nothing, that had so little way of speaking forth His praise. But it has pleased Him to show me what He aye says, that out o’ the mouth o’ babes and sucklings His praise is perfected. Eh, neebors! I ken one that’s like the angels of the Lord! She wants faith, but she wants nothing else. She’s wearying, wearying to be at hame with the Lord, and hasna the heart to rise up off her bed, and come forth wi’ me to the salvation of men. You a’ know her as well as me! Maybe it’s Margaret’s prayers that have brought the Spirit on this parish. Ye know how she has prayed for us up bye at the burn, wrestling wi’ the Lord like Jacob. Eh, freends, if I had Margaret I would go forth light as the air! Lord, give her faith! Lord, raise her up! Lord, send thy blessed creature forth with us! Lord, Lord, listen, and give her faith! Oh, my freends, will ye no pray?’

At this moment Isabel’s emotion became altogether uncontrollable. It seemed to herself as if the inspiration she had witnessed had suddenly come upon her. She held up her hands wildly out of her dark corner where no one could see. Then a scream burst from her lips.

‘No,’ she cried out, in a voice so strained with passion that no one would have recognised it for hers. ‘No, no—not for Margaret; she shall not live, she shall have her will. Leave her in peace, and let her die.’

Isabel fell like a dead creature into her stepmother’s arms, not unconscious, with **all** her senses still wildly

vivid, but trembling like a leaf, and helpless as an infant. Then there was a moment of terrified silence, and heads soon turned timidly round in the darkness to search for the new prophet. Ailie, standing with her arms uplifted in sight of them all, gazed intently into the gloom with her great lambent eyes, waiting and listening for some moments after the voice had ceased. Then the prophetess suddenly sank into the girl by a transition so extraordinary that it caught once more the wavering attention of the audience attracted from her by the new miracle. Her arms fell by her side, a flood of tears came pouring from her eyes.

'Oh, Lord, Lord, Lord! ye have never refused me before!' said Ailie, with a wild cry of reproach, and sank upon the floor in a burst of weeping so helplessly natural and girl-like that the excited group around her gazed at each other in dismay.

Her sobs were audible through all the wild supplication that followed. But Isabel, worn out, was conscious of little more until she felt herself drawn into the fresh air, and saw the moonlight lying white upon the braes.

CHAPTER XII

THERE was little said upon the walk home. Isabel was too much exhausted to make any reply to the questions, and half reproaches, and soothing speeches, made in regular succession by her stepmother.

'What put it into your head to speak out like yon? And, eh, I'm glad naebody saw it was you. It would break my heart to hear them say the Captain's Isabel was gane after them. Lean heavier, my lamb. It was naething but the love and the contradiction in your bit warm heart. Ye've never been drawn to me, Isabel, but I was aye ane that kent ye had a warm heart.'

Thus they went on clinging to each other along the white line of road between the dark rustling whin-bushes and tough stalks of heather which caught at their dresses as they passed. When the light in her own low window at last appeared, a very fervent 'God be thanked' burst from Jean Campbell's lips. 'I canna face thae awfu' lonely roads. Ye never ken wha ye mayna meet, face to face,' she said as the cottage became fully visible. her soul encouraged by the sight of it.

To go out of the magic, significant night, silent with such excess of meaning, into the absolute stillness of the little parlour, all grey and brown. with its one window

shuttered and curtained, and the two candles twinkling solemnly on the table, and Margaret dozing in her chair, was the strangest contrast. The clock was still ticking steadfastly as if it never would stop, through and through the house; little Mary, with very large wide-open eyes, sat on a footstool opposite Margaret, from whom she never removed her anxious gaze. 'She's been dozing and waking, dozing and waking,' said Mary; 'and eh, but ye've been lang, lang!'

'It was a lang meeting the night,' said Jean. 'But what way have ye closed up the window, and Margaret sae fond of the view? I would have gotten an awfu' fright to see a' dark if we had come round by the Loch.'

'It was like as if something terrible might come and look in,' said little Mary, with a shudder. And then Margaret, roused by the stir, opened her feverish bright eyes and asked what news.

'You've been long,' she said. 'And were ye as pleased as you thought you would be, Isabel?'

Isabel had taken off her bonnet and pushed back her hair from her aching forehead. She looked up at her sister with the intention of replying, and then suddenly overpowered, hid her face in her hands and burst into tears.

'Ah, she may well cry,' said Jean. 'If I was ever mair shamed in my life! Isabel, the Captain's daughter, and a lady born!—she was that led away, Margaret, that she spoke like the rest.'

Isabel gave her stepmother an indignant warning look, and then rose, throwing aside her cloak, and placed herself behind Margaret's chair out of reach of those eyes which she could not bear.

'Isabel—spoke—like the rest! I cannot understand,' said Margaret faintly. 'Are you meaning that it came upon her—in power?' And the invalid turned round wistful and wondering. Could it be that God had passed over her in her suffering and given this gift to Isabel? Perhaps, for the first time, there came to Margaret a touch of that strange, wondering envy which all her friends had already felt in her behalf. She had been content that Ailie should have the privilege denied to herself. But Isabel! She turned and sought her sister with her eyes, wandering. 'It is because I am not worthy,' she said to herself, but not without a pang.

'It was them that were speaking of you,' said Isabel: 'that you wanted faith; and that we were to pray, and that you were to be made to arise and go forth with Ailie to convert the world. It made me mad. I couldna sit still and keep silence. I cried out—'She shall have her will. It's not for you to say'—and then Mr. John

said it was a lying spirit and not from the Lord; and then I mind no more!’

‘My poor Isabel,’ said Margaret, with a smile of relief and tenderness; ‘it was true love that spoke and nothing else. But she’s not to go there again—neither Isabel nor little Mary. It can do them nothing but harm.’

‘It does me no harm that I ken,’ said Jean. ‘It’s awfu’ exciting whiles; but I never find myself the worse.’

‘You’re different from these young things,’ said Margaret; ‘but, oh! you’ll always mind—both of you—that it’s my wish you should not go there. I’m not uneasy about it from the present. After—when I’ll, maybe, not be here to speak—you’ll both mind.’

‘Go to your bed this moment, bairn,’ cried Jean, with the petulance of grief, ‘sitting glowering at Margaret with thae big cen! but mind ye dinna waken my poor Jamie going up the stair. It’s getting late, and time we’re a’ in our beds after such a night.’

‘I am very comfortable,’ said Margaret. ‘I am not disposed to move. I’m better here than in my bed, with that glimmer of the fire. I was always fond of a fire. It’s like a kindly spirit with its bits of flames, crackling and chattering. I have it in my mind to speak to you both, if you’ll have patience and listen. Don’t contradict me, Isabel. I know I am going fast, and why should you say no? But it would be a real comfort to speak and tell you what I wish before I die.’

‘Oh, Margaret! anything but that,’ cried Isabel.

The invalid shook her head with an expression of pain. ‘Nothing but this,’ she said; ‘if you want to cross me, and vex me, and drive me to be silent, it’s in your power: but my sister will never do that. I must speak, if you would leave my heart at rest. Dry your eyes, Isabel. I’m selfish, but ye must yield to it. If it was you that were going, would not your heart burn to speak before you left to them you hold dear? and to-night you must think not of yourself, but of me.’

It was a strange group: the room so poorly lighted, with the two candles on the table, the fire smouldering in the grate, dying into dull embers; Margaret laid out on her invalid chair supported by pillows, her pale face absorbing all the light there was; Jean sitting crouched together on the stool with her honest, comely countenance, serious now and full of anxiety, turned to her step-daughter; and Isabel in her chair apart against the wall, as if she were not one of them—her face visible only in profile—her hands hanging listless in her lap—her eyes cast down. The dying girl, who did not understand it, was wounded by her sister’s withdrawal; and yet what did it matter?—perhaps it left her more free to

speak than if Isabel's tender eyes had been searching out the meaning in her face before she could utter it? Even the irritation and half-estrangement of a grief too poignant to be submissive, Margaret could understand.

'I am thinking most of Bell,' she said. 'I've always thought most of Bell. It was natural. There were but the two of us in the world. And I've always been a woman, you'll mind. When she was but a bairn playing on the hill-side, I was like her mother. That was my nature; and now the sorest thought I have is to leave her without a guide in this hard world.'

Isabel could not speak—but she made a hasty, deprecating gesture with her hand.

'You would say, no,' said Margaret; 'but, Isabel, I know best. I am not vaunting myself, but I know best. For a while past you've been that you did not understand yourself. Your heart has been breaking to part with me, and yet you could not bear the sight of me. It is wearying to everybody when a poor creature takes so long to die. Oh, Bell, dinna say a word! Do you think I doubt you? I'm speaking of nature. And when I'm gone—so young as you are, and so hasty, and so feeling;—you've been a trouble to yourself and a mystery already, and what will you be then, with none near you to turn it all over in their minds?'

'If there's only me,' said Isabel, gazing into the vacant air before her, 'who will care?'

'I'll care wherever I am,' said Margaret. 'Oh, you canna think I could be happy in Heaven and my bonnie Bell in pain or sorrow. If you could but harden your heart against the movements that come and go—if ye would but take patience and think before you put your hand to aught. You were aye so hasty and so innocent. Do you mind when Robbie Spence fell into the Loch, and her after him in a boat before a man could move?'

'Ay, do I,' said Jean, 'and our ain Jamie when he broke his arm——'

'It was Isabel that carried him home, that big laddie!' said Margaret with pathetic smiles and tears; 'aye hasty, though she was so young and so slight; but there's worse danger than that. Ye might take burdens upon you that would be harder to carry. Oh, my bonnie Bell! if I could but have seen you in a good man's hands!'

'I'll not hear you speak,' cried Isabel, almost wildly; 'am I wanting any man?'

'If you would promise to take thought before you made up your mind,' said Margaret; 'I'm no myself when I think of my Isabel in trouble. If you would go to your room, and take a while to think. I canna tell what's beyond the veil, nor what's permitted *yonder*;

but, Bell, I would aye promise you this—not to *appear* to be a terror to you. But if you would take time to think, and shut to your door, and say to yourself, "Margaret loved me well. She's been dead and gone for years and years, but she couldna forget her sister wherever she is. What would Margaret say if she were here?" And, Bell, I promise you this—not to frighten you, or appear like one coming from the dead, but to draw near and let you know what I'm thinking. Always if it is permitted—I canna tell.'

'Oh, Margaret! Margaret! I will die too,' cried Isabel, suddenly throwing herself at her sister's feet; 'I can bear no more.'

'No, there's plenty more to bear,' said her sister, caressing the head which was buried in her coverings. 'You cannot get out of the world like that. It is me that has the easy task. I have but to bide quiet and let Him do a'—me that took pride in being the wisest of the two, and able to guide you. And it is you that will have all to bear. But, Bell, it's a promise—you'll mind when the time comes? I will not say, Take this one or take that, for the heart is free. But take thought, Isabel!—oh, my darling, take thought; and I'll always give you my opinion, not in your ear like the living that are bound in the flesh—but into your heart. And now,' she added, raising herself a little, with a cheerful tone in her voice, 'I have but two or three more words to say.'

Isabel did not move nor speak. She had her face hid in the coverlid as if she were weeping. But she did not weep. Her eyes were blazing, covered by her hands, like stars, parched with drought, almost fiery in their light; her heart beat with the violence of a creature at the fullest height of life. But no one saw those wild heavings; she knelt there with her face hidden, and only her soft hair, which had fallen into disorder, within reach of Margaret's hectic hand.

'You'll aye take care of her as long as may be, Margaret went on addressing Jean. 'When she's older she'll understand. It is just that all should be hers—everything we have: but she'll not depart from my desire about Jamie, you may be sure of that. And, Isabel, you'll no rebel, but let her be good to you, all her days. And be a good sister to the bairns. I'm real foolish,' she went on, with a smile; 'as if me being away would make such a change—I'm real vain. But you'll no blame me, you two.'

'Blame you!' said Jean, with her handkerchief to her eyes; 'O Margaret, you're ower thoughtfu'; but it was that the callant should be bred for a minister? that was what you meant?'

'If he turns his mind to it,' said Margaret. 'And I think that is all. You'll be good to *her*, Bell, and she'll be good to you. And keep little Mary out of the meetings. She's very keen and bright, brighter than Jamie. You'll not let her go astray. And be kind to everybody for my sake,' Margaret said with a smile, which touched the very extremity of self-control, and had a certain flicker almost of delirium in it—'I am fit for no more.'

CHAPTER XIII

DURING the week that ensued various events happened in the parish which kept up the local excitement. The prophets, who up to this time had been in external subjection to the authorities, at the first mention of restriction had thrown off all bonds. Mild as was the attempted control it was more than they could bear, and no sooner had they thus emancipated themselves from all habitual restraint than their higher pretensions began to develop.

The intimation that Ailie was about to set out on a mission to the general world could not but be exciting information to the parish; and at the same time there was an arrival of pilgrims from that outer world to inquire into the marvel. Commissions of investigation had already come from the Presbytery of the district, and even from Edinburgh and Glasgow, the news having spread quickly at a moment of general religious excitement; but the inquirers from England, one of whom was soon discovered to be 'an English minister,' produced a more marked impression, and thrilled the Loch with indescribable pride.

Margaret was sinking day by day. She had made her last step on the grass, taken her last draught of the fresh mountain air out of doors. From day to day it seemed impossible that she should ever again totter from one room to the other; and yet she managed to do it, retaining her hold upon her domestic place with a tenacity quite unlike the feebleness of her hold upon life. Sometimes, indeed, she had to be carried to the sofa in the parlour, from which she could still gain a glimpse of the Loch, and feel herself one of the family; but she would not relinquish this last stronghold of existence. 'It will be time enough to shut me up when I'm gone,' she would say, smiling upon them: and the doctor's orders had been that she should be humoured in everything. 'Nothing can harm her now,' he had said, with that mournful abandonment of precaution, which

shows the death of hope. And the parish—nay, 'the whole Loch,' held its breath and looked on.

As for Isabel it seemed to her that she lived in a dreadful dream. The vague terror that had been hanging over her so long had settled down, and could no longer be escaped; it seemed years to her since the time when she had believed it might not be—or at least hoped that it might have been delayed.

Perhaps it was because Jean Campbell, too, was in something of the same stupor of exhausted nature, produced by constant watching and want of sleep, that one visitor, whom they had guarded against for days, found his way to Margaret's bedside. The children had been set to watch on the road, to warn the cottage if the very shadow of Mr. John fell upon the hill, and had repeatedly brought back news of him, which set the watchers on their guard. But, as it happens so often when such a watch goes on for days, there came a moment when the little scouts thought of something else, and when all other visitors were absent, and the road left open for the enemy. Jean had withdrawn to her kitchen while Margaret slept, or seemed to sleep—and had thrown herself, worn out, into the great arm-chair covered with checked linen, where she nodded by the fire. Isabel sat at the foot of the sofa, with her eyes on her sister. And those eyes, too, were veiled by the drooping eyelids, in the fatigue and awful tedium of the protracted watch. Thus the anxious household slumbered at its post, overtaken by weariness and security. How long the doze lasted none of them could tell, but when some faint movement of her sister's made Isabel start from her insensibility, it froze the blood in her heart, and almost woke her to positive exertion, to see the man they all feared seated by the sofa on which Margaret lay. He had lifted the latch, and come in noiselessly, while they all slept in their exhaustion. There was still light enough to show his dark face, gazing intently upon the white vision on the sofa. All the hectic had gone from Margaret's cheek. She was as pale as if the end had already come, and lay with her blue-veined eyelids ajar, as it were, the long lashes a little raised from the white cheeks, the pale lips parted with her painful breath. Mr. John sat by the side of the sofa, shadowing over her like a destroying angel. Had it been Death himself in person, the sight could scarcely have been more startling. His countenance was working in every line with suppressed but violent emotion, his lips were moving, his eyes fixed intently upon the face of the sleeper. He had stretched out one hand over Margaret's couch, not touching her, like one who gave

a benediction or enforced a command. Isabel sat and watched, paralysed by the sight. There seemed no power in her to stir or speak. And Margaret still slept, moving sometimes uneasily under that gaze, which seemed capable of penetrating the insensibility of death, but never unclosing her liquid, half-seen eyes, or giving any sign of consciousness. By degrees, half-audible words began to drop from the prophet's lips.

'Life, life!' Isabel could hear him say. 'My life for hers! My salvation for her life!'

The passion in him gradually became less controllable. It was with God he was struggling, with a vehemence of desire which left no room for reason or for reverence. After a while, he slid downwards upon his knees, always noiseless in the supreme urgency of his passion. He held his hand up over the couch, maintaining the painful attitude with a rigidity beyond all ordinary power.

'I will not let Thee go, till Thou bless her—till Thou save her!' Isabel heard him say.

All this appeared suddenly before her, awaking out of her dream. There was not a sound in the house, except the clock ticking through all with its monotonous, merciless beat, and Margaret's irregular breathing, now louder, now lower, a fitful human accompaniment. At last, the power of self-control could go no further.

'Rise. rise, woman beloved!' he cried, hoarsely, springing to his feet. 'I've won you out of the hands of Death!'

The harsh agony of the cry woke Margaret. He was standing between her and the faint light from the window, bending down over her from his great height with outstretched arms: his face invisible in the darkness which was made doubly dark by his shadow. Thus suddenly called back from her temporary oblivion, she woke with a little start. 'Isabel!' she said, instinctively. And then in a moment it became apparent to Margaret that another ordeal had come to her worse than the paroxysms of failing breath or palpitating heart in which Isabel could help her. With an instinctive thought for her sister, she raised herself slightly upon her pillows. 'My dear, my dear, you're not to blame,' said Margaret, with a little moan. 'She had hoped to get out of the world without this trial, but now that it had come it must be borne.'

'She is not to blame,' said Mr. John. 'Nobody is to blame. I came stealing in like a thief in the night: they shut me out from you as if I would harm you—I that am ready to give my life for you. Margaret, arise! I've won you out of the hands of Death!'

'Oh, if you would not waste this madness on me!' said Margaret. 'Isabel, let him stay. Death thinks no shame and feels no fear. I'm glad that I can speak to him before I go. John Diarmid, dinna drive me wild. This life is no so grand a gift that I should seek it out of your hands. God's will is more to me than your will. Sit down by my death-bed; and oh, man, be silent, if ye have any heart! It's for me to speak now.'

'I will do what you will—whatever you will,' he said: 'Margaret! if you will but listen to the Lord's voice and rise up and live! Can I stand by and see you die?'

A little impatient sigh burst from Margaret's breast. 'You stood by,' she said, 'once before, and took all the light and all the sweetness out of life. For once I will speak. I have been proud, but it's not the time for pride now. O, John Diarmid, it is fit it should be your hand to call me back to life as you call it! I would never have upbraided you—no, not by a word. It was a thing settled you were never to come here. But now I will speak before I die.'

'Speak!' he cried, going down upon his knees with a crouch of submission in his great fame. 'Say what you will. I am vile to all and vilest to you. You are as God to me, Margaret, Margaret! But take the life I have won for you and never see me more.'

'The life you have won!' said Margaret, with a tone which in any other voice would have been disdain. But her voice was like that of a dove, and had no notes of scorn in it. Yet soft as the approach to contempt was, the dying girl was remorseful of it. 'I must not speak like this,' she said; 'and you must not speak to rouse the ill spirit in me, and me so near the pleasant heavens. Whisht! I canna think shame now, though Isabel is there to hear. John Diarmid, once I was as nigh loving you as now——'

'You're nigh hating me!' he said, with a great sob breaking his voice.

'No; as I'm nigh being free of all the bonds of this world,' said Margaret. 'I was little more than a bairn: I was like Bell. They said you meant me harm; but I never thought you meant me harm——'

As the pathetic voice went on John Diarmid bowed his head lower and lower till at last he sank prostrate on the floor by the side of the sofa. It was her last words that brought him to this abject self-humiliation. He knew better than she did. A groan burst out of the man's labouring breast. Even Isabel—sitting in a trance at her sister's feet, roused up out of her stupor, her cheeks burning with a wild flush of jealousy and shame, half-wild that Margaret had descended from her saintly

pedestal to avow the emotions of earth, and furious to think that any man had shared her heart—yet felt an unwilling movement of pity for the prostrate sinner. Margaret only continued without any change.

‘I never thought you meant me harm,’ she said, once more smiting with the awful rod of her innocence the man at her feet. ‘But when I heard what you had been, and what you had done, the light died out of the world. I am not blaming you. It was God that gave me my death, and not man; but from that hour I had no heart to live. Why should a woman strive to live, and fight against all the unseen powers, when this world’s so sore-defiled, and not a spot that she can set her foot on,—no one that she can trust? For me I had no heart to struggle more.’

A certain note of plaintive self-consciousness had come into the steady voice, broken only by weakness, with which Margaret told her tale, as if it were a history so long past that all emotion had died out of it. And so it was. Her almost love had faded in her heart; but there still remained a sense of pity for the young forlorn creature whose eyes had been thus opened, and of whom Margaret had half-forgotten that it was herself.

For the moment in her abstraction, in her deadly calm, she was well-nigh cruel. She took no notice of the man who lay abject at her feet, with his face to the ground. Her great spiritual eyes in those pale circles which approaching death had hallowed out, gazed wistfully into the darkness. Perhaps it was the convulsive movement of the prostrate figure by her which roused her at last. Suddenly she stirred, and, putting out a white thin hand, laid it softly on his bowed head. ‘John Diarmid,’ she said, softly, ‘are you walking with God now?’

He seized her hand, raising his head from where he lay, and knelt upright by her, pressing it to his breast, which heaved violently as with sobs. What compunction was in his heart, what sudden knowledge of himself, what remorse, no one could say. It was dark, and they were to each other as ghosts in the gloom. Margaret could see his gestures, but nothing more; if, indeed, anything more could have been learnt from the bent head and hidden countenance. Her voice grew softer and softer when she broke the silence again.

‘I know you’re moved to the heart,’ she said. ‘I am not doubting you *now*. You are changed, and I see you’re changed. And if you would but tell me there were no more such thoughts in your heart, and that you were walking with God—then I would feel there were some prayers answered before I die.’

'You have prayed for me, Margaret!' he cried. The passionate man was subdued to a child. His great frame was shaken by sobs; his eyes were wet with tears. He had not another word to say; his passion, his inspiration, all the prophetic pretensions which clothed him, had vanished like so many cobwebs. He knelt by the purest love of his life with a heart broken and speechless. She dying, and he without power to save.

'Aye!' she said, laying her hand once more upon his head; and then there was silence broken only by the groan or sob that came from John Diarmid's heart.

The next minute familiar sounds and sights broke in. Jean Campbell, with a candle in her hand, came pushing open the closed door. 'Eh, you're in the dark, like craws in the mist,' she said, as she approached.

At the sound of her voice John Diarmid sprang to his feet, rising like a giant out of the darkness. He bent down his head suddenly over Margaret, pressed his motionless lips to her forehead, with a movement of despair, which was no kiss, and passing the astonished woman who held up her candle to look at him, rushed forth like the wind, letting the night and the chill air enter as he plunged forth.

How long Jean might have stood spell-bound by consternation, but for this sudden puff of cold air which blew about the flame of her candle, it is impossible to say; but she was roused instantly by fear of the cold for Margaret, and ran in haste to close the doors.

'Weirdless loon!' she cried, as she came back, 'without so much sense as to think the cauld would harm her. Eh, Isabel, how could you let him in to vex her? It was a' my fault dovering and sleeping in my chair. My lamb, ye're weariet to death?'

'Aye, very near to death,' said Margaret, with a smile; 'but there's nobody to blame; and I'm glad I saw him at the last.'

'So lang as he didna drive you distracted wi' his prophecies and his miracles,' said Jean, looking anxiously with wistful eyes from one to another. Isabel had risen at her stepmother's entrance, and drying the tears from her cheeks, hastily began to arrange the coverings over her sister; she shrank from Jean's look, feeling herself somehow to blame, and angry at the thought that had the other watcher been awake this trial would not have come to Margaret. But, as for Margaret herself, she made no effort to avoid Jean's eye; she lay back on her pillows panting sometimes for breath, with a humid softness about her great shining eyes and a quivering smile on her lips. Very nearly tired to death; and yet ever patient, waiting till a little more should achieve the end.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN Mr. John rushed from the door of the Glebe Cottage mad with grief and sorrow and a sense of impotence, it was not to return to his home or to enter upon any of his usual duties, even such as might have seemed akin to the passion and excitement in his mind. He went up the hill-side without knowing where he went, rushing into the clouds and rain which were sweeping across the invisible braes.

The dark waters of Loch Goil were glimmering just before him ere he arrested his steps; he had climbed and descended the hill without knowing how; he was drenched to the skin, beaten by the wind, wild, half crazed with the multitude of his thoughts; all his new-born sense of power, all his confidence in his changed condition, were gone. He was a man abandoned by hope, and at the same time a prophet forsaken of the Lord. It had been not quite six o'clock when he left the Glebe. It was nearly midnight now when he forced his way through the tough stalks of the heather, crushing them down with his feet, stumbling into the forests of whins, going wildly through the yellowing brackens. Wild creatures rushed out of their coverts as he crossed the braes; it was too dark to see any path, even had he cared to confine himself to it. All was silent and black when he drew near the first inhabited place, the little cluster of cottages above the Manse to which he directed his steps. It was there that Ailie Macfarlane, his coadjutrix and predecessor, lived with her father and mother. Not a light was visible in any window. The little congregation of souls, wrapt in the kind protecting darkness, slept and took no note of all the surrounding mysteries of the night. Mr. John went up to Ailie's door and knocked, waking echoes which seemed to go over all the parish, and rousing the dogs at Lochhead out of the light sleep of their vigilance. It was some time before he had any reply. Then the lattice window, which was on a level with the door, was softly opened. It was Ailie herself who looked out, her fair locks braided about her head like a saint in a picture.

'Who are ye? what do ye want?' she said, with a certain anxiety in her voice. 'Is it a summons to me too?'

Mr. John was too much pre-occupied to observe what she said, but he discerned the signs of some emotion, and took it for fear.

'Fear me not,' he said, 'I've come, from wrestling with

the Lord upon the hill—and, Ailie, I have a message from Him to you. Fear me not.'

'I'm fearing nothing,' said the girl, with momentary surprise—for even had she not been protected by her exceptional character, to speak with 'a friend' from a chamber window, even in the middle of the night, was counted no sin on Loch Diarmid. 'I'm fearing nothing,' she repeated, steadily, 'but my heart's sore and my een are heavy. Say quick what you have to say.'

'It must be said to-night,' he said; 'I speak not of my will, and I will not ask you what is yours. Ailie, the Lord has revealed to me that you and I must go forth together to His work, bound together like Christ and His Church. You cannot go alone for you're young and weak. He has appointed me to you for a protector. He has said unto me, O man, fear not to take unto thee thy wife! Ailie, this word is to me and to thee. Prepare! I would go forth, if that were possible, as soon as it is day.'

Then there was a pause. The clouds parted, driven by the angry wind, and the sky lightened faintly with a pale gleam which showed the man's worn face and wild aspect as he stood before the window.

'Oh, no, no,' she cried; 'we must wait. There will be clearer light. If such a thing as this is to be, it will be established in the mouth of two or three witnesses. I wouldna trust to myself, my lane. Oh, no, no; we must wait for clearer light.'

'Take heed that ye perish not from lack of faith,' said Mr. John. 'Take heed that you despise not the Lord's message. Ailie Macfarlane, hear the Word of the Lord! and see ye sin not against the Holy Ghost.'

A shudder ran through Ailie's sensitive frame. 'No,' she cried, 'no, no, never that. I'm His handmaid to do His pleasure. But oh, there's nought can be done this night. The night's for rest and thought and prayer. It may be the Lord will show His will to me too. And there's my father and my mother,' cried Ailie with a little gush of tears.

'Let the dead bury their dead,' said her extraordinary suitor, in a voice which seemed to ring round the house like a groan. And then he added with a tone of authority which struck chill to Ailie's heart: 'Hitherto you have been a law to yourself, and no man has been set over you; but the wife must take the Lord's will through her husband who is her head.'

Ailie fell down on her knees trembling, and held fast by the sill of the window.

'I am no man's wife,' she cried; 'and I'm feared and bewildered, and see naething clear. Oh, for the Lord's sake, gang away from me for this night!'

Mr. John turned his eyes which had been fixed on the pale opening in the clouds to her face. 'Yes,' he said, 'I'll go; the flesh can bear no more. Go on your knees to Him, and not to me. And He may make it clear to you if He thinks fit; but in light or in darkness I call on you to obey. Is His servant to stand still because there is no light?'

'I'll pray!' cried Ailie, with a gasp. And he withdrew from the window, stumbling over the little flower-borders in the cottage-garden, and gazing vaguely up into the white break in the sky. His haggard, pale face fascinated her in its abstraction. She rose, and closed her window with nervous hands, still gazing at him; when suddenly another window opened—that of the attic over the cottage door.

'Wha 's there?' cried a voice. Instinctively Ailie shrank back, but yet kept her ear at the opening that she might hear. It was the voice of her mother, who had been roused by the conversation below.

'Wha are ye, disturbing honest folk in the middle of the night, and what do you want here?'

'It's me,' said Mr John, raising his head listlessly. 'I was sent to her with a word from the Lord.'

Old Janet Macfarlane uttered a hasty exclamation. 'I'm meaning no reproach to you, Mr. John; but I wish your words would come in the day.'

Mr. John made no answer. He stepped over the paling once more, and paused at the door immediately under the old woman's window. Fatigue was beginning to tell upon him: his passion was dying out. He had no longer any strength to defend himself. Perhaps Janet's heart smote her as she saw his listless step; or perhaps the natural rural impulse of communicating information was her only motive. She paused a moment, searching in her mind something keen and sharp to say to him—but finding nothing, bent out from her window over the leafy, embowered porch.

'Mr. John,' she said, with solemnity; 'nae doubt you've heard the news?'

'What news?'

'Margaret at the Glebe is wi' her Saviour,' said the old woman. 'She died at ten o'clock. Good night.'

The noise of the window closing rang over all the silent Loch and silent heavens, and went echoing, echoing away into the hollows of the hills. It struck the man in his despair like the thunder of dissolving earth and Heaven.

CHAPTER XV

THE death of Margaret Diarmid had been, as people say, sudden at the last. Whether the agitation of that visit had been too much for her, or if Nature at the end, having lingered so long, had succumbed in a moment to some unseen touch, it was impossible to tell. She was dead—that was all that could be said. Things had gone on as usual all the evening through in the dim parlour, where Jean came in from time to time to see that all was safe, and Isabel moved softly about at the appointed hours with her cordials and her medicines. Margaret had been lying, as her stepmother had left her, with her large, humid, wistful eyes fixed, taking less notice of everything around than usual, looking out, as it were, into an unseen world of her own. An intense quietness had fallen upon the house. The children had been sent early to bed; and Jenny Spence, who had volunteered to assist in the watch, was comfortably installed in the big elbow-chair by the fire in the kitchen. ‘We’re better without her,’ Jean had whispered to Isabel; ‘but it’s a real pleasure to her, and she’s a connection; and she’ll no disturb Margaret.’ Jean herself had taken up her position, wrapt in her cloak, just within the parlour door. It was usual for them, at an earlier hour than this, to remove their patient to bed. But Margaret had been so still that they had hesitated to disturb her. ‘By and by,’ she had said to them softly, as she lay there with her white face upturned, and her open eyes. She was not asleep; but so quiet, so smiling, breathing so calmly. Could it be that she had taken ‘a good turn?’ Isabel, seated at the foot of the sofa, her duties over for the moment, kept her watch, praying mechanically, dozing by moments, stupified by grief and weariness. Jean behind backs saw nothing of what was passing. But after a time the stillness became intolerable, and weighed upon her. Her first impulse was to steal out to the kitchen and rouse Jenny Spence, and console herself with a melancholy talk over the fire; and then she bethought herself that it would be cruel to leave Isabel in this atmosphere, which somehow seemed all at once so strangely chilled and silent. Listening intently, it seemed to her that she heard no breathing but her own. Margaret’s hardest paroxysms would have sounded natural and consoling in place of that awful stillness. Jean’s heart began to throb in her ears, and her eyes to dazzle. It was some time before she could move. When she at last summoned her powers and roused

herself, it was all clear to her in a moment. The strange silence, the sudden chill, had been death; but thus the long illness, which all the parish expected was to have a triumphant and victorious conclusion, ended softly in the silence, without sound of trumpet or demonstration of exceeding joy.

As for Isabel there was an interval, unfortunately for her a very short interval, in which she was conscious of nothing. Not that the simple, healthful girl, trained in stern Scotch self-restraint, found refuge in any swoon or fit of bodily unconsciousness. But fatigue had so worn and bewildered her, and benumbed all her faculties, that she was incapable of any fresh sensation. The kind women took her to her bed, and the young creature, all broken and worn, slept the heavy sleep of sorrow, that profound, joyless slumber which pain and suffering bring to young eyes. When she woke, it was not with any fresh pang: she had carried the sense of 'what had happened' with her throughout her sleep—but with still the same heavy, listless, benumbed sensations. Sometimes, when she started involuntarily at the thought that it was time for Margaret's wine, or her soup, or her medicine, her heart thus sharply pricked would rouse up, and her eyes gain relief in the measureless tears of youth. But she did not come to herself for days, scarcely until the time of darkness was over, and the procession had gone out from the cottage doors, and her sister was carried away from her, while she herself remained behind. Then her life sprang again out of excess of pain.

It was about a week after the funeral when Jean came in, solemnly tapping at the parlour door, where Isabel sat alone. She was arrayed in her new black gown, and with her freshest cap, and had a certain air of gravity and importance about her. She came in softly and stood by Isabel, half-behind her as she sat at the table. 'Isabel, my bonnie woman,' she said, turning her homely voice to its softest cadence, 'it's time we were having a talk, you and me, about what we're to do.'

'What should we do?' said Isabel; 'but sit down and tell me what it is: it's weary, weary to sit alone.'

'My lamb!' said Jean, furtively smoothing the girl's soft hair. It was seldom she ventured on such a proof of sympathy, for Isabel was proud. But she did not sit down; she stood with some agitation, twisting the table-cover from the table, shifting from one foot to another. At last her burden came forth with a burst. 'It's best I should ken; it's a' yours now, Isabel; and you were never that fond of me and the poor bairns. I'm your father's wife, and I'm no a lady born like you; but I'm one that

would never thole to be where she wasna wanted. Whisht! whisht; I'm no misdoubting your kindness; for her sake I ken you would aye be kind; but if there was to be a change I would like best it should be now.'

'Why should there be a change?' said Isabel, weeping. 'Oh, is there not change enough to please you? Would you like me to stay my lane in this still, house and die? But I could not die—I would go wild; and, maybe, you would not care.'

'As if I didna care for everything belonging to ye!' cried Jean, once more timidly caressing her step-daughter's bent head. 'If it was only *that*, I would be content to be your servant—as near your servant as would be becoming to the Captain's widow,' she added, after a momentary pause. 'But your heart's touched and tender the noo; and if, after, you should reflect on me for taking advantage of you, or anybody else should reflect——'

'Who is there that has any right' cried hasty Isabel, drying her tears with hot and trembling hand. 'There's but me now in all the world, and no one that can bid me go or come, or do this or that. Ah, me!'

'It's a grand thing to be free,' said Jean, her voice faltering a little; 'free o' them you're bound to by any bonds but what God has made. When it's nature it's different—or when it's your free choice it's different; but you and me, Isabel, are free to meet and free to part. I'm no saying but what it would be a sore heartbreak; but if ever there was to come a time when you would reflect——'

'Oh, dinna speak,' said Isabel; 'if it's your will to leave me, go, and let me take my chance. If I was to go out of my senses or die on the hill-side, what is that to other folk? There is none to care if I was mad or dead to-morrow. If you speak because you're wearied of me and my silly ways——'

'Oh, Isabel, my lamb!' cried Jean, with tears, 'I'm saying I would be your servant if that was a'. But you maun tell me your will plain if we're to go or stay. A's yours. If we live here, the bairns and me, it's upon you; and that I canna do unless you say plain out—Bide; and let things be as they have aye been.'

'Is there anything else I could say?' cried Isabel; 'maybe you've forgotten already what was said to you and me—yon night? But I will never forget. Nothing is changed but one thing. Oh, no, I am saying wrong—the heavens and the earth are changed and all's different—all's different!—but not between you and me. And I'll mind about Jamie,' she added, once more hotly and tremulously, drying her eyes. 'He's to be brought

up for a minister, if he has a desire to it. We'll speak to Mr. Lothian, or Mr. Galbraith, and I'll not forget.'

Jean shook her head softly behind her stepdaughter's back.

'I'm no speaking of Jamie now,' she said; 'afore he's old enough you'll have a man, Isabel, that may have other meanings. But I'm aye thankful to you for the thought. And a young lass is real solitary by herself. I'll bide since you say sae; and weel content; but when the time comes that you're married, my woman, we'll speak of that no more.'

'The time will never come,' said Isabel, hastily. 'I have had my share of life. I am not like a young lass now.'

'My bonnie lamb!' said Jean, with a tender smile, letting her hand rest on the downcast head. It was that last touch of self-pity which broke down Isabel's reserve. She turned suddenly round, and throwing her arms round her stepmother wept and sobbed on her homely bosom. She clung to her as to her last support, and Jean received her in her motherly arms. Her heart had warmed to the wayward Isabel, all through her faulty youth with a love less reverent, but more familiar than that she had given to Margaret. And now a common grief united them as they had never been united before. She held the girl close, repeating over and over those soft names of homely kindness.

'My lamb!' she said, 'my bonnie Bell! my bonnie woman!' and bent down her head over her, not with the lavish caress of a lighter nature, but with a strong sustaining pressure. When the sobs grew fainter, and exhaustion mercifully dulled the pain, it was she who smoothed her hair, and dried her wet cheeks, and gave her such comfort as she could bear.

'Come ben beside the bairns,' Jean said, drying the tears from her own eyes, 'and leave this room that is so full of a' that's passed. There's a cheery fire, and the wee things' faces are aye a comfort. That was *her* thought: and I'll make you your cup of tea, and we'll do our best to bear the burden for her sake.'

There was a cheery fire, as Jean had said, and Isabel was cold with that chill of grief which penetrates into the very heart. The blaze and the warmth gave her a little forlorn consolation; and so after awhile did the sound of voices other than her own, and the care and service that surrounded her.

Jean attended her to her room when it was time for rest, as she would have done had Isabel been her own child, and gave her one of those rare shy kisses, of which the homely Scotch matron was half-ashamed in her

intense reticence and self-control. 'Try and sleep, my lamb,' she said, 'I'll come back and put out the candle.' And then she returned to her kitchen, to shut her shutters, and put the 'gathering coal' upon the fire, and make all snug for the night. When she had ended her silent labours, Jean took her moment of indulgence also, sitting down to think in the elbow-chair, by the side of the dark heaped-up smouldering fire.

'Na, na,' she said to herself, 'I maunna trust to that. If Margaret had set it apart out of her share—but I'm no reflecting upon Margaret. It was a' the first wife's siller, and it's Isabel's by right; and I dinna doubt her bit warm hasty heart. But if she were to marry that English lad, me and mine would be little to her after; and if she was to marry anybody else—even the minister—he would be for thinking of his ain first, and maybe a family coming. It would be real natural. Na, na! I maunna trust to Isabel; and, maybe, after a' it's best for the laddie,' she said to herself, with a sigh. 'If the root o' the matter's in him, he'll fight his way to it; and if it's no, he'll never try; and when a' 's said and done, maybe that's the best.'

But it was with a sigh she rose from that moment of reflection and stole back to remove the candle, and saw with affectionate pleasure that Isabel, worn out, had already dropped to sleep. 'The poor bairn!' Jean said, in her tenderness, and clambered up to the attic beside her children, with that sense of being the protector and sole guardian of so much helplessness, which fills the heart of a solitary woman with such softness and such strength.

CHAPTER XVI

THE next step in Isabel's solitary new life was the visit of Miss Catherine, whose entrance Jean permitted a few days earlier than decorum properly allowed.

'After a', she's a connection, and the poor bairn's best support,' she said, as she went, wiping her hands on her apron, to open the door to the visitor. 'Oh, ay, Miss Catherine! come your ways ben; she'll be glad of a kind word. She's no suffered that much in her health—God be thankit! But whiles my heart breaks to see her in that weary parlour her lane, and nothing to wile her from her ain thoughts.'

'I had not the courage to come sooner,' said Miss Catherine. 'But, Jean, we must not leave her to her own thoughts.'

There could be but one way of meeting for the two.

Isabel stood up for an instant with a nervous attempt at composure, and then dropped weeping into her old friend's extended arms: and there was first the inevitable attempt at consolation, tender words and encouragements. 'It's well with her—it's better for her. We must not mourn, for her sake.'

'And now tell me, my dear,' said Miss Catherine, when poor Isabel had wept herself into quietness, 'how you've settled with Jean? You are young, and it will be a strange life for you here by yourself. Is it settled that everything is to go on as it has been?'

'Why should there be any change?' said Isabel. 'It is her house as long as it is mine. Is she not the nearest I have left?—and, oh, she's kind! though I have never been good to her all my life.'

'She is not a drop's blood to you,' said Miss Catherine, with some warmth. 'Isabel, I'm not one to bid you run away from grief: it's a vain thing to do; but you're young, and you have a sufficiency, and why should you be burdened with the second family? I had nothing to say against it in the past. Jean was aye kind, poor woman. But I cannot bear to think of you staying here in this room after all that's come and gone.'

Isabel made no answer. She took up her work with trembling fingers, and made an effort to go on with it, while the visitor, for her part, had enough to do to master the sob in her voice.

'You are so young,' she said; 'you cannot know what you want, or what is best for you. I know a poor gentlewoman in Edinburgh, Isabel, that would be very kind to you. A change would be good, though you cannot think it now. Making and mending is grand work for the mother of a family, but for a young creature alone, it is not to be thought of as an occupation. And there are things you might learn that would fit you for your life to come. How can you tell what your life will be? Your blood, my dear, is as good by the mother's side as mine; and if you saw a little of the world—You're a proud thing, Isabel, you'll not allow you want anything; but the change would do you good, and the novelty would divert your mind—'

'As if I was asking to be diverted!' said Isabel. 'Oh! Miss Catherine, if it's like that you think of me! I am seeking no change. My life, the best of it, is past. What have I to think about but how to be quiet and do my duty, and consider my latter end?'

'Oh, bairn! that you should be such a bairn! said Miss Catherine; 'if it were not for what you've gone through, I could find it in my heart to be angry. Twenty years after this you'll not be so sure that your life is

past, nor think so much about your latter end. What is likely is that you have a long life before you; and by and by you'll marry, as most women do. I don't say now—you're thinking of nothing of the kind now; but when due time has past, and you have shown the respect you ought—You may think me heartless to speak so, but I'm not heartless, Isabel.'

'I cannot understand what you are saying,' said Isabel. 'Oh, let me be! I am at home, and among my ain folk. I neither want change nor diversion—nor to be married—nor a new life! If there is one thing I would like, it would be to work late and early and take care of the house. But I am too old to learn lessons now, and I am not old enough to be always thinking about myself.'

'Perhaps it's best for the present,' said Miss Catherine, finally giving in, 'though I always think when there are changes to be made it is well to make them at once. You think you can go on for ever like this, and you'll find you are far wrong; but, for the present, my dear, let us talk of other things. Jean will be good to you, I don't doubt. If I were not concerned for your mother's daughter, Isabel, and anxious to see you free from all those common folk, I would not speak—'

'She is very kind to me, and she's the nearest friend I have now,' said Isabel; 'and if she was good enough for my father to marry—'

Miss Catherine shook her head.

'You are aye your old self,' she said, 'trying to provoke me for all the sorrow in your heart. But we'll say no more on that subject. I would tell you the news of the country-side, if I thought you would care; but if you would not care—'

'Oh, I do!' cried Isabel, with a violent, sudden blush. She was ashamed of herself for caring, and angry to think that the country-side should be anything to her in her desolation. 'I was meaning,' she continued, timidly, 'if there's any news about friends.'

'Mr. Lothian has been ill, Isabel; that is why he has not been here.'

'Has he not been here—I did not know,' said Isabel, with profound and calm indifference. Miss Catherine gazed at her for a whole minute, without moving, her eyes fixed with a wonder beyond words on the inexperienced creature who could thus balk the most artful attempts to draw her into any path she did not choose herself.

'My dear,' she said, rising, 'you do not know all the love that good man wastes on you. Would you have been as careless as that if I had spoken of the lad under his roof? As if the minister was not worth twenty of him! and you not to see it, you foolish, foolish Isabel!'

'Miss Catherine,' said Isabel, rising too, with fine youthful gravity and superiority, 'is it right to speak like that to me, at such a time?'

These last words took away Miss Catherine's breath. She was lost in amaze at the curious innocent dignity and cunning and utter unconsciousness of Isabel's self-dependence. She felt herself rebuked by the girl who stood so pale before her, who was so resolute and superior and certain of what she said. Had the circumstances been different, she would have laughed at the naïve skill with which her attempts were baffled. But it was not a moment to laugh, as Isabel had said.

'Well, well; you will not hear anything I have to say,' she said, 'but there may come a time when you will be glad of my counsel. And when that time comes it shall not be denied you. Come to the House and see me when you're able, Isabel, for the sake of the past. You need not be afraid. I'll keep silent and give you no advice.'

'I will always be thankful for your advice,' cried the unconscious girl, 'more thankful than I can tell—for who have I to look to now? I would thank you, on my knees, if ye would always tell me what I ought to do.'

Miss Catherine could not restrain a smile; but Isabel's earnestness and good faith shone out of her serious eyes.

'If you bid me counsel you in the general, and then turn away from every single thing I say, how can I help you?' she said, 'But, my dear, I'll not stay now—go out and take some exercise, and do not sit brooding here. Jean will take care of you, and the fresh air will do you good.'

'I was thinking to take a turn—on the braes—where it's quiet,' faltered Isabel. Perhaps she was afraid to meet Miss Catherine's eye; she swerved aside a little so as not to face her, and paused, and then sought refuge in tears, she could not have told why.

'Eh, but these bairns are strange creatures,' Miss Catherine said to herself as she left the cottage. 'Me to think she would be too broken with her grief to mind what she did. But no! for all so young as she is, as fixed in her ways as if she knew the world from beginning to end like an A B C; going her own gait and thinking her own thoughts, and how to have her own way. And not a fortnight yet since my poor Margaret was laid beneath the sod. These creatures nowadays never know what sorrow means. They think of themselves when *we* would have broken our hearts. And me that was always so fond of that wilful Bell!'

Isabel had but scarce dried her tears, and composed herself as best she could to her solitary labour once more, when Jean stole in with anxious looks.

'My lamb,' she said, 'there's the minister coming up the hill. He's been ill, poor man—and white and wan he looks as I never saw him look before. Will I let him in? It's better now if you can bear to see him; and, Isabel, if you're feared for his speaking, I will cry upon the bairns and get out the Book, and he'll give us a word o' prayer. I dinna ken what he may think, for he's newfangled in his ways. But that was aye the practice on such an occasion, as long as I mind. Will I let him in?'

Isabel turned away with a hasty gesture of pain; but she was humbled and penitent, and the solitary parlour looked more solitary, more dreadful than ever to her broken and suffering mind.

'I do not care who comes,' she said, with petulance. 'Let them all come. When they have once been here, and spied upon us how we bear it, maybe they will let us be, and come no more.'

'Oh, Isabel!' said Jean, 'it's no with that thought the minister comes. You know well what's in his heart, though he might be your father—and a' the parish kens.'

For the first time this suggestion was a kind of comfort to the poor girl. She had been feeling so ashamed, so wicked, that there was some balm to her in the thought that all the parish was aware with what feelings she was regarded by the first man in it, and the esteemed of all.

'Let him come,' she said, sitting down by the window, where she would have the Loch at least to turn to, away from the reproachful affection in Mr. Lothian's eyes. 'If they would but let me alone!' she said to herself; but in her heart—the impatient, petulant, struggling heart, desired anything rather than to be left alone.

Mr. Lothian came in, looking, as Jean had said, white and wan, yet full of a hushed fever of agitation, with flushes of colour crossing his cheek, as he came up to her, and took into his her half-reluctant hands. Then Nature suddenly, as with a stroke, quenched out all the curiosity that had been in Isabel's heart. The sight of him woke again the tears in their fountains. She could say nothing to him, but only weep helplessly with her head bowed down, almost choked by the convulsive sob which climbed into her throat. His heart was so melted with love and pity that he laid his hand on her head with half-paternal tenderness.

'Poor child! poor child!' he said, bending over her, holding the soft small hand which she no longer thought of withdrawing from him. The sight of her tears was almost more than he could bear.

He was still standing by her when she came to herself, and the first thing that roused Isabel was the instinctive

homely politeness which her humble breeding had taught her. As soon as her eyes were so clear of tears that she could see, she would have risen to find a seat for him.

'Sit still, Isabel,' he said, 'I have not come to weary you to-day; I shall not stay. Only one moment, my dear, to tell you—but what can I tell you? you know everything I would say.'

Isabel could make no reply; but somehow on the very borders of that outbreak of her sorrow there came to her the sense that her curiosity was satisfied. The man's voice, though he was so old, like her father, was eloquent and musical with love.

'I could not come to you sooner,' he said, 'and I have not come now to trouble you with words. It is not the time to speak of what one might wish, or what one might dream. But, my dear, I want you not to forget that there is one heart not far off full of love for you. Not a word—not a word. Isabel, I am asking nothing, my dear. I am going away this minute, as soon as I've said what I have to say. Kindness you'll have in plenty—but love is rare. I thought I would just come and tell you of mine.'

'Oh, Mr. Lothian, I do not deserve it!' sobbed poor Isabel.

'And that there is not a trouble you have, nor a tear you shed, but I would fain bear it for you,' said the minister; 'and my thoughts never leave you in your sorrow night or day; that is all. My dear, when you think, you'll understand. It is not to bribe you to give me anything back—it is but to be a comfort to you.'

'I do not deserve it,' Isabel repeated, not knowing what she said.

And then the good man sighed, and laid his hand once more tenderly, reverently, upon her drooping head.

'I might be your father,' he said; 'but I love you. And farewell for this time, my dear. That was all I had to say.'

The next moment it was as a dream to Isabel that he had been there. She cast a timid look round her, and he was gone, and the very sound of his footsteps had already died away from the flags at the door.

CHAPTER XVII

It was some days after this before Isabel actually ventured out upon the braes. One afternoon, standing in the garden, seeing nobody near, a forlorn impulse seized her to visit the birch-tree on the braes, which had

been so often their trysting-place. Looking up and looking down, the white roads seem to her to extend for miles on every side, without a single passenger upon them. Nobody, then, could criticise or blame her for that sick movement of her heart. Isabel went in softly, feeling her circumstances now too solemn to permit her to run out with a shawl round her as she had once done—and put on her bonnet. And then, with a thrill of excitement, took her way up the hill. Either its steepness or some strange expectation took away her breath. The braes were changed from what they had so lately been. The ferns were crumpled up by the first touch of frost, and tinged yellow. The heather bells were all dry and dead, with the colour and life gone out of them, like so many *immortelles*. And the turf was wet under Isabel's feet. The great heather bushes caught her dress, and sprinkled her with showers of rain-drops. She was cold, and her heart sunk within her. Was it maidenly to come and look for him here when he did not seek her? Was it becoming her bereavement to be able now to think of him, to remember anything about the birch, and all the foolish words that had been said under it? She put her arm softly, almost with a sense of guilt, round its silvery stem. There were only young trees on the braes, and this little lady of the woods with its long locks waving, and its graceful, slender stem, was like Isabel. He had said so, moved by the sentiment which sometimes makes the dullest mind poetic. She thought of that as she put her arm round it, and leaned her cheek against the silvery bark. Moved by her touch, the branches dropped a little shower of rain over her. Were they tears? She wept, too, leaning upon her woodland likeness.

'It is liker me now—far liker me now—for I'm alone! alone!' said Isabel; and with a pang of exquisite anguish could not tell which she was mourning for—her dead Margaret or her lost love.

But tears will not flow continually, however full the heart may be. They had all dried out of her eyes after a few minutes, and she stood still leaning against the tree, gazing out once more upon that familiar landscape, and wondering if she was to see nothing for ever and ever but the still loch and the roads that stretched away so long and wistful up to the sky on one side, and away to the Clyde on the other, without a living creature upon them to break the stillness—when she heard behind her a rustle as of someone coming. She dared not turn her head to see whom it was, but the sound made her heart thrill and beat with a wild excitement she could not control.

Then, suddenly, an arm was put round her, and a voice sounded in her ear. She had known it must be so. A flood of satisfaction came into her heart. 'I thought I was never to see him more!' she said to herself without turning her face to him. But he had come at last, and her mind for the moment required no more.

'It was a long time before I could make sure that this black figure in a bonnet was you,' he said, as if they had parted an hour before; 'I have been gazing and wondering for five minutes who it could be. I ought to have thought of the change of dress.'

Was this all he had to say to her after 'what had happened?' Isabel's heart shrank, with a sense of sudden chill, within her breast.

'I came out because my heart was sore,' she faltered. 'I cannot tell why; I thought I would like to see it again.'

'Not to see me?' said Stapylton, coming round where he could see her face.

'If you had cared for that you might have come before,' said Isabel, with a little movement of displeasure. How different it was from the conversation she had dreamed of!—the soft words, the tender pity, the assurances of his love.

'Yes, among all those women that are constantly about you,' he said, 'your stepmother, and that old witch Miss Catherine—to see you coddled and kissed and mumbled over! No, Isabel; if I could have had you all to myself, as I have now—'

'And you never thought. Maybe she wants me sitting there her lane? Oh, Horace! I would not have studied my own pleasure if you had been in trouble.'

'Well, never mind,' he said. 'Of course I am not so good as you are; if I were to show myself so gentle, and patient, and unselfish, it would be taking your *rôle*. But we must not quarrel now we have met. You are pale, my darling. They have been shutting you up indoors and preaching you to death.'

'Do you think there is nothing else to make me pale?' said Isabel, moved once more by a pang of disappointment.

'Don't let us speak of that. Why should we dwell on such gloomy subjects?' said Stapylton. 'Change of thought is as necessary as change of scene; and, besides, I have other things to tell you of. It is weeks now since I have been able to get near you. Don't let us be unkind and miserable now that we have met at last.'

Isabel had no answer to make. She was stupified by his tone; and yet how could she, loving him as she did, tell herself that he was heartless? Her startled soul

paused and stood still for a moment, and then she said to herself that this must be the way folk thought in England, the custom of the bigger, greater world. No doubt it was only in an out-of-the-way corner like Loch Diarmid that there was time to dwell upon personal grief. She dried her eyes hastily with a furtive hand, and half-upbraided herself with self-indulgence. But she could not reply.

'I am not very cheerful, either,' he said. 'I want you to comfort me, Isabel. I have heard from home since I saw you last, and I have no further excuse to make. I fear I shall have to go away.'

'To go away!' cried Isabel, feeling as if the sky had suddenly darkened, and all comfort had gone out of the earth.

'It is very hard upon me,' he said, 'just when I might have had you a little more to myself. But I am not my own master, and the folks at home must be obeyed.'

What could she answer? So much in need of pity, and comfort, and soothing, as she was, so unprepared to encounter any new blow! She gave a little gasp as for breath, leaning again upon the birch-tree. And once more the chill tears from its long drooping branches came down upon them like a shower. Stapylton sprung aside with a little impatience.

'Hallo!' he said; 'mind what you're about!' And then, after a pause, 'Well, it appears you have nothing to say!'

'What can I say?' said poor Isabel, shivering with agitation and pain. 'If you must go, Mr. Stapylton, it cannot matter what I think or what I say.'

'I knew it would be like that,' he cried; 'I knew you would take it as an offence. But, Isabel, look here; I have been dangling after you for more than a year. You are quite willing I should hang about and wait for you here; and perhaps you would let me come down to the cottage and see you, for anything I can tell, now. But as that is all the satisfaction I have ever got, or am likely to get——'

'What satisfaction would you have?' said Isabel, under her breath.

'What satisfaction would I have? that is a charming question to put to me after all that has passed between us. Just look here, Isabel; if it had not been for your ridiculous scruples, think what a different position I should have been in. I'd have written home a penitent letter, saying I was very sorry, and all that, and that I was married, and all about it. There would have been a flare-up, of course; but what could they have done? Whereas, now, what can a fellow say? I cannot moon

on here for another six months, or another year, or perhaps more than that. Neither my people, nor anybody's people, would listen to it for a moment. When I speak plainly you are affected; and yet it is all your own fault.'

'If I look like that to *him*, what must I look to other folk?' Isabel said to herself. Her pride was not roused, but broken down. Even the thought of answering him was absent from her mind. She had to receive the expression of his will; but what could she reply to it? She had nothing to say.

'So,' he continued, after a pause. 'I am to be left to make the best of it, I suppose. You have no answer to give me even now.'

'You have asked me no question, Mr. Stapylton,' said Isabel, faintly. 'You have but found fault with me. It was never my meaning to keep you hanging on, as you say. What you asked me was impossible—then; and if I am aye to be reproached and blamed for what happens, maybe it is best that it should always be impossible. I would not be the one to keep you back—from your own folk—or waste your time—or—'

'What more?' said her lover, irritated. 'Say something more! say you've been making game of me all the time. I can believe it. Perhaps that canting hypocrite at Ardnamore would please you better. I hear he was in the cottage not long ago; or the minister—'

Isabel's heart swelled as if it would burst. She raised her drooping head with what remnants of pride she had left in the utter overthrow of all her strength.

'I cannot tell,' she said, with a gasp, 'what right any man has to say such things to me.' And she disengaged herself from the birch-tree which had been her prop and support—but softly still, poor child, not to throw upon him the rain with which it was laden—and made a step or two away. Then she paused, finding it hard work to stand alone, and harder work still to restrain the convulsive sobbing which struggled in her breast. 'If we are to part,' she said, softly, taking breath between the words, 'you know best—I am not saying a word; but if we are to part, may not we part friends at least?'

And with a woeful smile she put out her hand to him. She was too weak for pride; she seemed to herself to be dying, too, like Margaret, and dying folk should be kind, she said in her heart. He was but a man, and perhaps knew no better; and she was too much crushed and wounded to be angry. The only anxious desire she had was to be done with this, and to get home to the fire, to feel some sensation of warmth in her once more; and then die.

'I think you want to drive me mad,' he said; and then he seized the proffered hand with sudden haste, and drew her almost roughly to him. 'This is a woman's way of doing things, I suppose,' he said, 'but not mine—crying; you seem to me to do nothing but cry. Look here, once for all, Isabel, you had a reason before, but you have none now. Will you come with me now?'

'Where?' she said, in a whisper, not having breath enough or heart enough either for resistance or utterance.

'Where? what does it matter where? It might be here for anything I care; but all this ridiculous set would object, and there would be time lost, and the news would be sent home. Come with me now—come to-morrow. What does it matter? You have no invalid to keep you back. What! offended again? How is a plain man to understand all your fancies? If you like to be gloomy and cry I can't help it, Isabel; but what is the good of dwelling on the past? You did all you could be expected to do, and more. Surely you may think of yourself now.'

'It is you that does not understand,' said Isabel, with a sudden movement of indignation, withdrawing from him. 'What can I say that will make you understand?'

'I don't want to understand!' he cried. 'Come, Isabel, don't keep me in pain. If you'll meet me here to-morrow I'll arrange everything to-night. We'll go to Kilcranion and get the steamer there, and reach either Glasgow or Edinburgh in the evening. Isabel! no, you shan't go away! You can leave a note for your step-mother. Surely, I am more to you than she is. You will make me happy, and make everything possible. It is best to write and tell them after it is done. We'll go and see everything together; and you never were out of your parish before. Isabel, it will bring back the roses to your cheeks again.'

He held her hand, though she struggled away from him, and bent forward gazing into her face. Isabel's pale cheeks grew crimson with a violent blush; all at once life and force and strength seemed to pour back into her heart with this wild temptation which shook her to the very depth of her being. The stream had sunk so low that this sudden tide swelled all her veins to bursting, and brought noises to her ears, the sound of awakening, confused hum and buzz of every pulse, of her breathing and her heart. Escape out of this grey atmosphere into the ideal light—out of this chill into the warmth of love—out of this stillness into movement and music and sunshine, and all the stir of common life. But again with equal suddenness a sense of the chill, the grey landscape, the falling night, the heavy evening

dew came back to her, quenching out the light and stilling the sounds. She uttered a heavy sigh, she clasped her hands together as if relinquishing all outside aid.

And Margaret not three weeks in her grave!' That was all she could find to say.

'What has that to do with it?' said Stapylton, 'you sacrificed yourself to her when she was living—and are you to make no use of your freedom now she is dead? *She* can't feel it *now*: what will it matter to her whether you are here or with me? You are free now; go where you like, it can't affect her any more.'

He had taken her hand again, but she wrung it out of his almost with violence; a dull flush came over her of nervous passion. 'You neither understand her nor me,' she said, with a pang in her heart. 'Oh, how dare you speak—how dare you speak?' and in her anger she stamped her foot upon the yielding turf.

'Now I'll tell you what, Isabel,' he said, 'I am not to be trifled with any more. It must be made an end of one way or another. The steamer leaves Kilcranion at three——'

'It shall be made an end of,' cried Isabel, 'when you can speak to me like that in my trouble—when you can speak of *her* like that—oh, say no more! It shows me you do not know what love means—not what it means. I bade you farewell, and you would not take it—but now I say, Go, Mr. Stapylton, go! You have said enough—oh, too much, too much! I cannot bear it. Free! and nothing to her! O man, man, have ye a heart within ye? and can you think I would be glad of that?'

'I can't speak your cant,' cried Stapylton. 'Isabel! this is the last attempt I will ever make——'

He followed her as he spoke, for she had turned from him, making her way towards the highroad. For a few minutes he went on with her, keeping close by her side, speaking rapidly.

'This is the last time I will speak. The steamer leaves Kilcranion at three; I will be here waiting for you at two o'clock. I will take every precaution, and make every arrangement. Think it over, Isabel, you never made such an important decision. If you do not come to me at two to-morrow we may never meet more in our lives.'

She stopped and stood gazing at him as he came to this conclusion. For his part he had grown pale and breathless with excitement. He looked at her menacingly from beneath his lowering brows. 'Never in our lives if not to-morrow!' he repeated, looking intently in her eyes as if to look her down.

But Isabel was roused, too; she met his eyes without

finching, though every particle of colour had left her face.

'You threaten me!' she said, with unconscious scorn. 'If it was me, I would go to the end of the earth for one I loved—not frown at her, and break her heart to do a thing that's impossible. Oh, how could you ask me to do it? It will have to be never—never! if that is your last word——'

And even then poor Isabel's maidenly soul was so faithful, so incapable of believing he could mean the cruel things he said, that her eyes grew wistful and woeful looking at him, for one final moment appealing still.

'I will wait for you all the same,' he said, with a half-laugh. 'When you think it all over, you'll change your mind. At two o'clock I will be here.'

For yet one more moment they stood confronting each other; he with a smile of affected calmness; she with a gaze that gradually clouded into despair. Then she turned with a little wave of her hand, and left him. He did not attempt to follow. He stood on the same spot watching her as she wound her way through the heather. Once or twice he moved a step in the same direction as if to go after her, but immediately stopped himself.

'If I give in now all's lost,' he said to himself, trying to force his lips into a cheerless whistle. 'She'll have thought better of it before to-morrow,' he said unconsciously aloud. After all, a sister is only a sister, a sort of secondary relationship in life. What girl (he thought) would lose a husband for the sake of a dead woman who could interfere with her comfort no more? 'She'll think better of it,' he repeated to himself in his heart.

CHAPTER XVIII

ISABEL went softly down the hill in a concentrated calm, such as only excitement knows. There was a vague, indescribable force in her; a flush of hysterical strength, an exaltation of feeling and bearing and step. Jamie had been sent out by his mother to look for her, and met her some hundred yards from the cottage, stopped short, amazed by her looks, 'Oh! Isabel, what is it?' he cried; but Isabel swept past him unaware of his presence. She went in through the parlour to the innermost retirement of her own room, and there sat down to think; but she was not capable of thought. She sat down with her bonnet and shawl still on by the side of the bed on which her sister had lain in the last silence

of death, and leaned her head against the chill pillow to still and calm herself.

It was thus that Jean found her half an hour later, when, having heard Jamie's report of Isabel's return, she went to seek her wayward charge. Jean's first glance informed her that the crape on her stepdaughter's dress was limp, and spoiled with the damp, and that her feet were wet.

'Oh! Isabel, my bonnie woman, it's no good for you. You've been in the kirkyard again,' cried Jean putting her apron to her eyes. She could make nothing of the cry, 'Oh! no, no, not there,' that came from Isabel's white lips. Where could she have been but at the grave? It was perhaps a little hard that she should deny it, as if Jean could not enter into her feelings; but no doubt it was natural. Jean took the forlorn creature into her motherly arms.

'Come ben to the fire, my lamb,' she said, 'your crape's damp and a' ruined, and your feet are as wet as the moss itself. I canna have ye ill to break my heart. My darlin', put off your bonnet and come ben to the fire. I'll change your feet and make ye a cup of tea. Oh, Isabel! it's an awfu' loss and an awfu' trial—but ye maun mind, it's God's will and canna be wrong.'

Isabel turned away from her with a cry of despair, which Jean misunderstanding set down but to the renewed vehemence of grief rekindled to its fullest by the melancholy visit which she supposed her stepdaughter to have just paid. When she got her at last into her own elbow-chair by the kitchen fire, and knelt before her chafing the girl's little white feet in her rough but kindly hands, 'Isabel, my bonnie woman, you must promise me no to go again,' she said, surrounding her with kindly ministrations.

'Oh, let me be!' sobbed Isabel, 'let me be;' and sighing, Jean left her in her own especial sanctuary, by the warm light of the kitchen fire. Unawares her eyes closed, her hands, which had been strained together with a painful pressure, unclasped, her head fell softly back upon the blue and white covering of the high-backed chair. Jean was so moved by the sight when she returned into the kitchen, coming and going at her work, that she turned even little Mary, just coming home from school, out of the darkling place. 'Can ye no see that Isabel's sleeping?' she said sharply to her own flesh and blood.

'But, oh, what makes her sleep in the day?' said Mary, following into the parlour with a frightened face, 'Is she to die too like Margaret?' and big tears sprang to the child's eyes.

'The Lord forbid!' said Jean, 'but, whisht now, and be as quiet as a mouse—she's worn, and wearied, and grieved at her heart. When ane 's in sair trouble sleep is sweet.'

'I wonder if she ay dreams of Margaret like me,' said little Mary. 'Eh, mother, Margaret comes and stands by my bed every night!'

'Oh, bairn, whisht, and no break my heart!' cried Jean, uneasily. 'Ye were ay the one for dreams.'

'But I'm no feared,' said little Mary, 'whiles she speaks, but I never can mind what she says. It's just the same to me as if she was living. Then I used to see her a' day, and now I see her a' night—and she has ay light round like an angel out of Heaven.'

'Oh, whisht, with your dreams!' cried the mother with a tone of anger, which belied the sudden tremor in her heart. 'Have ye nae lessons to learn like Jamie? He's away on the braes, the poor callant! with his book.'

'He's making a whistle out of a rowan-tree branch,' said Mary; 'I cried upon him as I passed, but he wouldna come in, and he'll cut his fingers, for it's getting dark.'

'Eh me, he's an awfu' laddie!' said poor Jean, rushing to the door. What with her precocious daughter, and her backward son, and Isabel whose heart it was so hard to keep, she had, as she herself expressed it, 'a bonnie handful.' But fortunately the one anxiety kept the other in check, and uneasiness about the cutting of Jamie's fingers dulled in her mind the painful impression of Mary's dreams; and then night fell, and the children came in, and Isabel awoke to a sense of warmth and comfort. She did not even propose to retire into her dignity in the parlour, but stayed in the elbow-chair, and even smiled as she had scarcely done before. She was glad to take refuge among them—glad to avoid the inevitable encounter with her own thoughts; and indeed her mind had taken refuge in a kind of insensibility. She had felt so much that for the moment she could feel no more.

Thus it was that Isabel did not return to the events of the afternoon during the whole course of the night. The emotions that had been so strong in her seemed to have been somehow lulled to sleep. She made an ineffectual attempt to recall them when she went to her own room, but fatigue and sleep got the better of her. A curious sense of escape came over her. She had expected to be rent asunder with indignation, and that madness which devours the mind when we are wroth with those we love. A hundred terrible questions had seemed on the eve of sweeping down upon her like so many birds of prey to be resolved and settled in a moment. And yet

nothing of the kind had happened: instead, a soft insensibility had crept over her mind. She was too weary for anything; and slept, like a tired child, quieted and composed and wrapped in physical warmth and consolation.

These were her feelings when she fell asleep. But Isabel awoke, in the middle of the night, as she thought, in the deep darkness and stillness, broad awake in a second, without any twilight interval between the deep blank of repose and the tremendous struggle of existence.

She turned from side to side in her weary bed, sometimes hoping that out of the gloom there might reveal itself a sudden figure, all blazing with awful brightness, to show her what was needful to be done—counting the steadfast, unbroken, terrible tickings of the clock, feeling the darkness affect her, a thing which weighed down her eyes and oppressed her soul. When the first shade of grey trembled into the dusk, it was to Isabel as a messenger from Heaven. Her heart bounded up with a sense of relief; and as the dawn grew, revealing in a mist the whitening hill-side, and the reflections in the Loch, she found it possible to sleep again and forget her troubles. She fell into a heavy slumber, which still lasted when Jean came softly into the room to rouse her.

‘I dinna like thae long sleeps,’ Jean said to herself, with a sudden pang: ‘Eh, if she should gang too, like Margret!’ and stood by the bedside reluctant to awake her, gazing at the sleeper’s pale face, at the unconscious knitting of her brows, and tremulous movements of her hand. She grew more and more anxious as the morning advanced, and Isabel, trained in the habit of early rising, never woke. The good woman stole repeatedly to her stepdaughter’s bedside, laying her hand softly on Isabel’s forehead, and touching the white arm which lay on the coverlet to discover whether she was feverish. When she opened her eyes at last, Jean was gazing at her with an anxiety which she did her best to dissimulate as soon as she perceived that Isabel was awake.

‘I thought you were never to wake mair,’ she said, with attempted playfulness. ‘Lazy thing! It’s ten o’clock in the day, and half the work of the house done. But, now you’re so late, bide a wee longer, and I’ll bring you your tea.’

‘But I am quite well,’ said Isabel, raising herself with a little start.

‘I canna think it, or you wouldna sleep like that,’ said Jean. ‘You, that were never lazy in the morning. You’ve gotten cauld on the braes.’

Jean did not know what meaning there could be in her words which brought that cloud on her stepdaughter’s

face. She looked at her very anxiously, but could make nothing of it.

'I shouldna have said a word of where ye were,' she exclaimed, with sudden compunction. 'It's me that's a thoughtless body, never minding. But we must submit to God's will, my bonnie woman; and I'll go, and bring ye your tea.'

'This will never do,' Jean said to herself, as she left the room. It will never do. She must have some change. I'll go and speak to Miss Catherine about it this very day.' And when she went back, with the tea on a little tray, the suggestion framed itself into speech. 'What would ye say to going to Edinburgh, and seeing a' the sights? But—eh! bless me, is the lassie daft?' cried Jean, thunderstruck by the effect of her words.

'I will not listen to you,' said Isabel, with sudden passion. 'Never! Go to Edinburgh! How dare ye put such things in my head? Go away, and play myself, and be happy—and my Margaret not three weeks in her grave!'

'My bonnie lamb!' said Jean, with streaming eyes. 'To see you happy—or if no happy, a wee cheerful—taking some good of your life—Margret would have given half hers. Do you think she's mair selfish, mair hard, no so thoughtful now?'

Isabel could but gasp at her with startled, wondering eyes. Was Jean, too, pleading for him? Was she taking his part consciously or unconsciously? She put away the food her stepmother had brought her, with nervous, trembling hands.

'I cannot lie here,' she said. 'I am quite well. Let me get up, and then I will know what to do.'

'Lie still, my dear,' said Jean, anxiously. 'You've been waking through the night, and greetin' sore; and you've got cauld on the wet grass. Lie still this day, and rest.'

'But I cannot rest,' said Isabel. 'I cannot breathe. My heart is like as if it were bound with an iron band. I want to rise, and to get the air.'

'Nae air the day except the air from the window,' said Jean. 'I can be positive, too. Na, na; I have the charge of you, and decline's in the family. You shanna cross the door this day.'

Isabel fell back on her pillow with the strangest sense of relief. She, who had never yielded to her stepmother in her life, felt a certain consolation in this exercise of authority.

'It is not as if it was my own doing,' she thought in herself, and kept still, satisfied for the moment with her relief from all responsibility. The manner in which she

subsided into sudden listlessness and quiet frightened Jean still more. Had it been anyone else, she might have accepted it as the result of natural weakness or weariness, but nothing of the kind had ever been seen before in wilful Isabel. Nor did it last long. When Jean returned, an hour later, her charge was again struggling with excitement.

'I am going to get up,' she said, with two brilliant spots of colour on her cheeks. 'I feel as if I were in my grave here. I must get out to the fresh air!'

Jean's answer was to draw away the curtain from the window. Then Isabel saw, looking out on the hill-side, the falling of the noiseless rain. It was no white violent blast with actual colour and solidity, but the fine impalpable dropping which penetrates through every covering, and which the experienced West Highlander looks at with hopeless eyes. 'To gan out into that wet would be as much as your life is worth,' said Jean, solemnly. 'The braes are nae better than a shaking moss, and the roads are running like burns. It's an awfu' saft day. Ye may get up and sit by the fire, but across the door ye'll no go, or else you'll quarrel with me.'

This time it was with a kind of despair that Isabel listened. He would never think of it—he could not expect her, nor would he go himself on such a day. His departure would be put off, and with it the crisis, and time would be left to think. A little time to think, even an hour more she felt would be something gained. She had another moment of tranquility, gazing out from where she lay through the low window, upon the melancholy braes.

After a temporary lull, however, her fever returned. This time she rose and dressed herself hastily, putting on, in a half-dream, not her new 'mourning,' with the crape on it, but a thick winter dress, black enough to indicate any depths of sorrow. Always like a walker in a dream—that was the only explanation she could have given of her own feelings. Clothed for her journey, yet without any intention of taking the journey, she wandered drearily about her sister's room. One o'clock, struck by the solemn eight-day clock, which gave a kind of mechanical soul to the house, knelled upon Isabel's ear, as she held her white trembling hands over the fire. It shook her like a convulsion of nature. But one hour more—and all to be decided in that hour—and her mind no nearer the solution, scarcely so near as last night.

'You're looking real weakly, my dear,' said Jean; 'shaking like a leaf. I'm no sure you should have risen out of your bed. Take this shawl round you, and I'll

give you some broth to warm you. You've eaten nothing the whole day.'

'I could not eat!' said Isabel, wrapping round her with a shiver the soft warm shawl. Tick, tick, tick! Would nothing arrest these inexorable moments? As they went on her thoughts seemed to rise round her like a whirlwind sweeping about and about her bewildered soul; every beat brought nearer to her the last moment when her fate should still be in her own power. And yet she was like one paralysed, and could not move. The minutes pressed and trod upon each other's heels, and yet were so slow in their confused procession, that it might have been an age instead of an hour. At last, while Isabel sat striving to break the spell which bound her, the door flew open and then closed violently after Jamie rushing in wet and muddy from school.

'It's no raining now!' cried the boy as he dashed forward to the side of the fire. Isabel started as if a shot had struck her. Just then the clock gave its little whirr of warning that it was about to strike the hour. She sprang up to her feet with a sudden cry—then sank down again—her pale head falling back against the chair, her hands falling listless on its arms. Jean, rushing to her, believed for the first moment that Isabel was dead. She was as one dead, her eyes half-closed and ghastly; her colour completely gone; her very lips deserted of all colour. The struggle had been too much for her. She lay insensible in a dead faint before her stepmother's affrighted eyes.

CHAPTER XIX

STAPYLTON sought the trysting-place on the hill on the decisive day with all the excitement natural to the crisis, but with little fear of the result. He had taken none of the precautions of which he had spoken to Isabel. What need was there of precautions? she would wear a veil of course, and a cloak. The road to Kilcranion was little frequented, especially on such a day; and by the time Kilcranion was reached, they would be, to some extent, among strangers, not liable to recognition at every step as here. He made up for himself a small bag of necessities, put the money he had just received to carry him home in his pocket, buttoned his greatcoat, and took his way through the drizzling rain to the hill-side.

He had loitered there for about half an hour watching for traces of Isabel's approach, and gradually beginning to be angry, when the rain suddenly stopped.

and the sky cleared ever so little. That was so far good. He put down his bag, and lighted a cigar to comfort himself as he waited. Below where he stood, just within sight, the thatched roof of the Glebe Cottage rose like some natural growth out of the heather. No doubt she must have waited for this moment; though why she should have waited, keeping him in the rain, he could not imagine. However it was a pardonable sin if she came now. This thought went through his mind just at the moment when Isabel, rising to go to him, fell back and fainted in her chair. He paced up and down the wet turf, and smoked his cigar, and looked for her, calculating in his own mind how long the weather would 'keep up,' and whether there might be time to reach Kilcranion before it came on to rain again. Another half-hour, it might be, was spent in these speculations; and then he took out his watch suddenly, and woke to the consciousness that he had been waiting for an hour on the moor, that the steamer must be gone from Kilcranion, and that the way of escape unobserved was closed to them for that night.

It would be difficult to describe the rage which rose in a moment in his mind. She, whom he thought so entirely subject to him, whom he had felt to be delivered over to him bound hand and foot when she was deprived of her sister—had Isabel rebelled against his influence? Had she cast him off? It did not seem possible. He would—but was that Isabel? It seemed to him he could hear sounds from the cottage; the noise of doors opening and shutting—a babble of tongues. Could they be detaining her by force? But then no one in the world had any right to detain her—she was absolutely free. Still there was some agitation about the Glebe. He snatched up his bag, not without a private imprecation upon Isabel for making him thus ridiculous, that he should have to drag it about from one place to another; and then he turned rapidly down the hill. Someone came out of the cottage as he got full in sight of it—someone whom he easily divined to be Mr. Lothian. 'Confound him!' said the young fellow; what was he doing there just at the moment when Stapylton's fate was being decided? Could she have consulted him? Was it through the minister's plotting that his purpose had thus been brought to nothing? The young man hurried down, carrying in his hand, and cursing the troublesome bag, which but for her—it was a small matter, but it exasperated him more than a greater. He had half a mind to fling it at the cottage door, and order Jamie to carry it for him for sixpence, by way of driving the stepmother out of her senses. But surely there was

something strange going on at the Glebe. Jenny Spence had just come out with another woman, and stood in audible colloquy with her at the door. 'You'll tell the doctor she's come to hersel,' said Jenny. 'It lasted an hour, Jean thinks. But time looks awfu' long when folk are feared, and maybe it wasna an hour. She's come to hersel, and very quiet, and there's nae such haste as we thought. But for a' that, tell him he's to come on here as soon as he can.'

'And will I say what was the cause?' said the messenger, while Stapylton listened eagerly.

'He's mair likely to tell us,' said the other; 'the first thing she asked was, What o'clock was it? And when she heard gave an awfu' sigh, and syne lay as quiet as a wean—though what the clock had to do with it Gude kens. I hope it's no her head; that would be worse of a'.'

'But she's ay been real healthy and strong. A body in trouble may faint, and yet no be that ill after a'.'

'But ye see decline's in the family,' said Jenny Spence, and then they parted, the one returning to the house, the other speeding on her mission. The bag grew less oppressive in Stapylton's hands. His clouded brow cleared a little. After all, she had not meant to leave him in the lurch. If she was ill that was a different matter. After a pause he went and knocked at the door, and asked how Miss Diarmid was?

'If you're meaning Isabel, she's no that weel,' said Jenny Spence; 'she was out yesterday in the damp, and she's gotten a cauld.' This was all the information she would condescend upon to a stranger and a 'young lad.'

'But what did I hear you say about a faint?' said Stapylton eagerly.

'Lord!' said Jenny, who, like most of the villagers, disliked the Englishman, 'how can I tell what ye might hear me say? I say plenty whiles that I canna mind myself; but Isabel's gotten the cauld. It's natural at this time of the year.'

'Cold? and nothing more?' asked the young man.

'Ane can never tell—it might turn into an influenza,' said Jenny; 'but that's a' the noo, for a' that I can see.'

And then she closed the door upon him, with a certain malicious satisfaction. Stapylton was no favourite in the parish; perhaps because of a sneer which was always lurking behind the few civilities which he had ever been known to offer. Jenny had no confidence either in his friendship or his love.

'Yon's the lad that would beguile a young lass, but be dour as iron and steel to his wife as soon as she had

married him. I hope there's naething amiss between him and Isabel,' she said to Jean, when she described this visit; and Jean felt a little thrill go through her, as if this new event threw light on something, though she could scarcely tell what.

'Do you think our Isabel would be thinking of any such nonsense at such a time!' she said, indignantly. But still a sensation as of some discovery darted through her own heart.

Stapylton, however, shut out as he thus was from all approach to Isabel, was not to be so easily put off. He hastened down the road at his quickest pace, determined to find out, at least, from the minister what had happened. Mr. Lothian was standing at the door of the doctor's house when the young man made up to him.

'Is it you, Stapylton?' he said, with an evident struggle to be friendly. 'It has been a dreadful day.'

'Not cheerful,' said the young man; 'but only, after all, "a wee saft," as you say in these parts. You have not been consulting the doctor, I hope, for yourself?'

'No,' said Mr. Lothian, fixing his eyes upon his interrogator, and adding nothing to the syllable. Stapylton's spirit of natural rivalry woke up at once.

'I saw a messenger for the doctor coming from the Glebe,' he said. 'I hope I might be mistaken—or if there is anyone ill there, that it is only one of the children. Children are always ill.'

'It is not one of the children,' said Mr. Lothian. 'It is—Isabel.' He uttered the name with a sigh. He was so anxious, that he was glad to speak, even to Stapylton, of the subject that lay nearest his heart.

'What is the matter?' said the young man, himself feeling somewhat breathless.

'She fainted to-day,' said the minister, 'without any reason, so far as we know. She had been out yesterday, at her sister's grave, and I fear she caught cold; but a fainting fit shows a state of weakness which—I cannot but be alarmed at it,' he added, hurriedly, with a faltering voice.

'So she said she had been at her sister's grave!'—Stapylton thought within himself. He liked her all the better for having lied to keep their meeting secret. He had not thought she had so much spirit. And after all it would have been a wretched day for a journey. Tomorrow would still leave time enough. He must send her a note somehow, to say so; and, well or ill, she must pluck up her forces and do it at last. He looked at the glass as he went to his room, and found that it was rising; and already it had ceased to rain. Dry clothes and a fine day would make all the difference. And

Isabel, who could no longer assume any superiority over him—who had been as sly about it as any ordinary girl—would have given herself to him by that time, and be altogether in his power. The young man whistled in sheer lightheartedness as he changed his dress. After this she could never mount her high horse, and show her superior sentiments, as of yore. The first thing he did when his toilet was accomplished was to write her a note. It was the first communication of the kind which had ever passed between them, but the fact did not excite him as it does most young lovers. Poor Mr. Lothian, on the eminence of his fifty years, would have written to Isabel with very different feelings; but Stapylton took it calmly, not being of an imaginative turn. His letter was as follows:—

‘DEAREST ISABEL,—I was in an awful state of mind when I found you did not turn up to-day at the usual spot. I felt furious I can assure you, and called you a jilt and a dozen other names. But I hear you’ve been ill, and I forgive you, my darling. Of course it never would have answered to set out in the rain on such a frightful day if you were ill. I got soaked to the skin waiting for you, which I hope you will be sorry to hear. But, Isabel, remember to-morrow is the last day. Go I must to-morrow. If you can’t pick yourself up and get well, and join me at the same place and the same hour, I shall go mad, I think, for I must go. My people are writing letters upon letters. There’s one waiting for me now, but I have not opened it, for they’re all pretty much the same thing over again. They’ve written to Mr. Lothian, and to Smeaton at the farm, for information as to what detains me; and I must not risk it any longer. But of course, when you know it’s so necessary, I can trust to your spirit to get well, and join me as I arranged. We’ll have a run into Edinburgh and do the business, and then I can write home. I don’t care much about seeing sights myself, but it will all be new to you, and you’ll enjoy it. So get well, my pet, as fast as ever you can, and remember to-morrow at the old place at two o’clock. I’ll have a trap waiting on the hill: but for Heaven’s sake don’t be late.

‘You may think me joking, but I never was more serious in my life. That is my way, as you know. I can’t look solemn and use big words like you Scotch. But I mean it all the same. If you don’t love me enough to come to me to-morrow, I’ll take it for granted you don’t love me at all. I will go right away by myself, and I can’t hold out any hope to you that I will ever come back. Now don’t mistake me, or think I am

threatening you. I have waited long enough, and you must not make a fool of me any longer. If I am once driven away, the chances are I can never return to Loch Diarmid—or to you. Come then now. It is our only chance. I will wait for you to-morrow as I did to-day. I shall be there at half-past one, and I shall wait till a quarter after two. No longer. You must be punctual. It's for you to decide if we are to be together for ever, or separated for ever. I can do no more. To-morrow at the old place, or most likely never in this world.

'Come, Isabel, my darling, come! Don't fail me. If you do, I will never see you more.

'Yours, if you will have me,
'H. S.'

When he had finished this epistle he read it over with a little complacency. If anything would do it, surely this would do it; though, indeed, there was no reason to believe that Isabel required any special entreaty. As he thought it over, it occurred to him that probably she had fainted out of sheer aggravation and passion when she found she could not go to him; and that was easily comprehensible. When he had folded his note, and got up to find some wax to seal it (for envelopes were not common articles in those days), he found the letters Mr. Lothian had told him of on the table, and tore the first that came uppermost open, suddenly, holding still his love-letter in his hand. His face grew heavy as he read, and pale. He went back to his chair and hurried through it, and the other which accompanied it. They were written on the same day, and to the same purpose. His father was ill. One of the letters was from his sister, the other from the doctor.

'Come for mamma's sake,' wrote the first. 'Papa is fearfully angry, and threatens to change his will. For your own sake don't waste a moment.'

'Your father is dying,' said the doctor. 'There is not a moment to lose. He is clamouring for a lawyer. Everything that I can do to postpone this you may be sure I will. But come! you may yet be in time.'

Young Stapylton wiped the heavy moisture from his forehead and stared into the air as if he had been staring at himself. 'Clamouring for a lawyer!'—'threatening to change his will!' Horace was not a devoted son, but such words as these penetrate the most callous heart. After the first shock he set himself to consider with a promptitude that did him credit. There was not a moment to lose. After all, it was just as well he had packed his bag. He would borrow the miller's horse and the minister's old gig, and there was still time

perhaps to get to Glasgow before the English mail should be gone. But there was not a moment to lose. It was only when he sprang up to prepare for immediate departure that he found the note to Isabel crushed in his hand, and bethought himself of her. He sat down again hastily and added a few words to it: and he was in the act of sealing it at Mr. Lothian's writing-table when the minister came in. Even then a spark of malice crossed his mind. Here was the best messenger he could find to carry his love-letter—and it would be a Parthian arrow, a farewell blow at his adversary.

'My father is ill,' he said; 'I must go instantly. There is just time to catch the coach for Glasgow if Andrew White will lend me his mare. I am going to ask him now.'

'Going—instantly?' said the minister, stupified, looking at the two letters on the table. Stapylton gathered them carefully up and nodded in reply.

'I shall see you again,' he said. 'I must rush up now to the mill. I may have the gig, I suppose? But look here,' he continued, coming back from the door. 'There's one good turn you can do me, if you will. If not I'll send it by someone else; will you take this note for me to the Glebe when you go?'

The minister started slightly and coloured high, but he made a little ceremonious bow at the same time and held out his hand. 'I will take it,' he said gravely; and then, perhaps out of the softening of his heart towards the young fellow, who was thus torn away at such a moment, leaving him master of the field—for to be left master of the field is very softening and consolatory to the soul—he laid his hand upon Stapylton's arm. 'The doctors says it is but grief and agitation—you'll be glad to hear it,' he said.

'Yes, yes,' cried Stapylton, scarcely taking in the words; 'and I may have the gig? There is not a moment to lose.'

CHAPTER XX

NEXT morning Mr. Lothian went to the Glebe as early as he could permit himself to go, though his heart had been on the way for hours before he permitted his reluctant footsteps to follow. He found Isabel lying on the sofa in the parlour, in the very spot where Margaret had died, and naturally the association of ideas struck him profoundly. 'Why have you laid her there?' he said to Jean, turning back from the door. There went a chill to his heart as if he had seen the tragedy all

acted over again, and heard that the end was already approaching.

Jean Campbell stared at him, only partially comprehending what he could mean. 'Where else could I put her,' she said, 'unless it was ben in the kitchen with me? and the doctor says she's to be kept quiet. And it's mair cheerful there than in a bedroom, where she could see nobody.'

'Cheerful!' echoed the minister.

'Eh aye real cheerful,' said Jean, in whose mind perpetual use and wont had subdued the force of melancholy associations. 'When I've put the sofa she can see the road, and the Loch, and the steamboat, which is real diverting—and I'm aye coming and going to keep her cheery myself. She's no to call ill. It's but the sorrow and the weakness and a' her trouble. We've no need to be alarmed about her health, he says.'

Mr. Lothian, silenced by this matter of fact treatment of the subject, went into the parlour, feeling even his own apprehensions a little calmed down.

'I am very glad to hear you are better,' he said.

'Oh, yes. I never was ill to speak of. I know I never was ill,' said Isabel, turning away her head.

'Then perhaps the rest and quiet is all you want?' said the minister, not knowing in his agitation what to say. And then there was a pause. There were a hundred things which he had longed to say to her, but could not when the moment thus came. He felt as if some cruel necessity was upon him to think of Margaret—to remind her that Margaret had died just where she was lying—to beg her to change her attitude, and look, which made his heart sick with terror. He had to restrain himself with an effort from suggesting to her this strange topic. And perhaps the other things he was tempted to say would have been less palatable still. At last, after a perplexed and painful pause, he brought out of his pocket the letter of which he was the unwilling bearer.

'I have a letter for you,' he said, 'it was left with me last night.'

'A letter!' said Isabel, growing pale, and then she turned it about in her hands, and looked at it. 'It has no address.'

'It was put up in such haste,' said Mr. Lothian. 'Isabel, will you read it now, in case I can give you any explanation?—or shall I go away?'

'It is from——'

'Horace Stapylton. I gave my promise I would bring it—though against my will.'

Isabel gazed at him, for a moment growing pale.

She held the letter helplessly in her hand. What could he mean? It had been *left* with him last night. He could perhaps give some explanation. What could he mean? Her pulse began to beat again as it had not done since her faint. She made Mr. Lothian a little sign with her hand to stay, for he had risen, and stood quite apart from her in the centre of the room. Then with a hasty hand she tore open the letter. When the minister gave a stolen glance at her, he could see that her cheeks were growing more and more flushed and feverish. The colour on them was no passing glow of delight and modesty, but the burning red of excitement and sudden passion. She went over it all rapidly, and then she uttered a low cry. Mr. Lothian glanced at her, but, seeing that the cry was unconscious, betook himself again to the window with what calmness was possible. Isabel had come to the postscript. He did not look round again for what seemed to him an age. What roused him at last was the rustle of the paper falling to the ground, and turning round hastily, he found Isabel with her face buried in her hands in a passion of tears. This was hard to bear. He went back to his seat beside the sofa, and picking up the letter laid it gently on her lap; and then he touched her shoulder softly with a fatherly, caressing hand, and said, 'My poor child! my poor child!' in a voice that came out of the very depths of his heart.

Then Isabel uncovered hastily her passionate, tear-stained face.

'It is not that!' she cried—'it is not that! Oh, I think shame! Am I one to be spoken to so?—is it my doing? I think my heart will break! Take it and read it, and tell me if it is my doing, before I die of shame.'

He could only gaze at her, wondering if her mind were unhinged; but hasty Isabel, all ablaze with passion and misery, could not stop to think. She took up the letter—her lover's letter, and thrust it into his rival's hand.

'If it is my doing—oh, never speak to me again!' she cried. Shame and anger, and disappointment and anguish, were all tearing her asunder. And she had no Margaret to go to, to relieve her. Someone must give her that support and solace which her heart demanded, or she felt she must die. She hung upon his looks as he read it, reading his expression.

'Could it be my fault?' she cried. 'Oh, Mr. Lothian, was I such a light lass? Was it anything I did that made him write like that to me?'

'No, Isabel,' he said, with a blaze of rage in his eyes, taking her feverish hand. 'No, Isabel. My dear,

think no more of it. It is that he understands neither yours nor you.'

And then instinctively, in an instant, hasty Isabel felt the mistake she had made, and felt that she could not bear any criticisms upon her lover even now. She took back her letter as suddenly as she had given it, and folded it up with trembling hands.

'He does not understand,' said Mr. Lothian, altogether unconscious of this rapid revolution. 'You speak a language he cannot comprehend. The women he knows are a different species. Isabel, I have never said a word against him——'

'No,' she cried, hurriedly. 'No; I am always a fool, and never know what I am doing. No. Dinna say a word now.'

Then he stopped suddenly, the very words arrested on his lips, and gazed at her wondering, not knowing what she could mean.

'You don't understand me either,' cried Isabel. 'Oh, not a word—not a word! You cannot judge him right; you never saw him like me. He was bewildered with the news; he never meant that.'

'If I were to say the like, would you ever forgive me?' said the minister, shaking his head. She answered only by weeping, a mode of reply which took all power of remonstrance or protestation away from the spectator. A hundred contradictory emotions were in Isabel's tears. Shame and pain over the letter; shame still sharper, if not so deep, that she had offered it to the criticism of another; wrath against Stapylton; rage at herself; and a certain bitterness against her companion for not taking her lover's part to her, for not contradicting her, and pleading his rival's cause. She could not have spoken all this wild jumble of pain and passion; but she poured it all forth in tears.

It was the postscript which had specially excited her, and which ran as follows:—

'I have just heard that my father is ill, and I must go. I would have waited till to-morrow even now, but I hear he might alter his will, which would never do. It is all your own fault. I was ready, waiting for you—as you know. What could a man do more? If you will come, and met me somewhere on the Border, as soon as this business is settled, you will find me as ready then as I was to-day. No time to say a word more.'

Mr. Lothian once more left her side, and went back to the window in his perplexity.

'I should not disturb you,' he said, with his back to her. 'I should go away. But it is grievous to me to

see your tears. I would give my very blood to save one tear falling from your eyes. And he would wring tears of blood out of your heart; and yet he is chosen, and I am rejected. What more can I have to say?"

"Nothing! oh, nothing!" cried Isabel. "Oh, will you not understand? I would like to hide myself in the depths of the earth. I was going to him yesterday, when I fainted. I have kept it a secret, and it was like a lie burning in my heart. Now I have told you; I would have gone with him if I had kept in life. What better am I than him? He is free to speak, for he sees I am no better. It is my fault, and not his. And now you know," cried the girl, clasping her passionate hands together, "and you may despise me! I let him tempt me; I could not bear the awfu' quiet. I'll cure you at least, if I shame myself. It was me that was to blame."

"But I am not cured. I'll never be cured, my dear, my dear!" cried the grey-haired man, coming back to her, with tears in his eyes, and taking her hands into his own. "It was your innocence, and you, at your heart?"

She left her hands indifferently in his, not seeming to care for, nor scarcely to perceive, his emotion. She fixed her eyes vacantly upon the air, with great tears rising in them.

"And Margaret knows it all," she said; two piteous tears, the very essence of her pain, dilated her eyes into two great globes, but did not fall. Self-abasement could go no further. Margaret, in Heaven, would not despise her sister. But what could she think of the variable, miserable creature who, fresh from her own death-bed, could be tempted by such a poor temptation, and think such thoughts as these?

CHAPTER XXI

WHILE all this had been going on at the Glebe, a drama of a different kind was evolving itself among scenes of strange devotion, and plans as wild as enthusiast ever formed, at the other corner of the Loch. Mr. John's madness had come to a height on the night of Margaret's death. The sudden announcement of that event falling on him at a moment when he had already worked himself into a kind of frenzy, had brought to a climax this supreme crisis of his being. He went away from Ailie's cottage, vaguely wandering across the gloomy moor to the Glebe, and throwing himself down

there on the wet heather, watched through the starless, solitary night within sight of the melancholy house which held his dead love.

The result of this terrible watch was an illness against which he fought with feverish passion, never resting nor stopping one of his ordinary occupations. He was in the churchyard on the day of Margaret's funeral, shivering and burning, and scarcely able to sustain himself, but keeping up by force of will, grasping at the cold tombstones, stopping the melancholy train, as it dispersed, to hear 'the word of the Lord.'

'You have closed her up in her grave,' he cried, his voice hoarse with sickness and passion; 'but when He comes, think you, your green turf and your cold stones will hide His saint from giving Him a welcome.'

'Come home! come home!' said the minister, approaching the haggard prophet, with a compassion, in which there was some touch of fellow feeling, 'you are too ill to be out of your bed, much less here.'

'By God's grace I will never yield to what you call illness,' said Mr. John; 'is it for me to rest and let them leave the place where they have laid her, with hearts like stones in their bosoms? Is she to have lived—and is she to die, in vain?'

'Mr. John, this is worse than folly,' said Mr. Lothian; 'no one here will let Margaret's dear name be made an occasion of strife. For her sake, go home and take thought, and rest.'

'For her sake, I will rest no more till He comes, or till I die,' cried the inspired madman: 'but I shall not die. I will live and declare the works of the Lord.'

There were many of the wondering party thus accosted who believed that Mr. John had been betrayed by his grief into a new vice, the most common failing of the country-side. 'He's been drinking,' they said among themselves: 'puir fellow!—to make him forget.' 'Na, na, it's no drink, it's grief,' said others. 'And wha are ye that speak like them in Jerusalem,' cried a third party, "'they're drunk with new wine," when it was the Spirit of the Lord?'

And then, a few days later, it became known in the parish that he had bidden Ailie Macfarlane in the name of God to become his wife, and excitement rose very high on Loch Diarmid. Something in the passionate, haggard face, which looked like that of a man on the point of death, and yet was to be seen more than ever at kirk and market, awed the common mind and threw a certain light of reality upon those desperate and tragic motives which had led him to such a proposal.

'He's lost Margret for this world; and now he thinks

to force the Lord to come afore His ain time and get her back,' said Jenny Spence.

'And Ailie—poor thing!—is to be his tool that he'll work with. I see his meaning—a' his meaning, as clear as daylight. He's out o' his wits about Margret Diarmid; and he's ta'en to the drink for consolation,' said another gossip, 'and he hasna strength to stand it. It'll be his death, and that you'll see.'

Poor Ailie, however, on her side, was of a very different mind. When 'the word of the Lord' had burst upon her on that night of Margaret's death, her very heart had failed in dismay and consternation. She had implicitly believed all that had been revealed to herself of her own mission, and was ready to set out at any moment without staff or scrip, with all the simplicity of a child. But her faith failed her when Mr. John's strange proposal fell on her ear. 'Is this a time for marrying or giving in marriage?' she asked, with something like indignation, when, with infinitely greater vehemence, he renewed his commands to her as the handmaid of the Lord. 'Is not the time of His appearing near? and are we to be burdened with earthly ties and earthly troubles when the Lord comes to His ain work? Oh, man! I'm no made to be ony man's helpmeet. There are plenty round you that are better for that; it's my meat and my drink to serve God. I couldna think of the flesh to please my husband, but of the Spirit to please the Lord.'

'And yet you contradict His Spirit and refuse His message,' said Mr. John, 'which I brought to you out of the darkness of the night—out of a mind rent and torn with pain, not lightly, or with common thoughts, but from His presence. Will you please Him by rejecting His word?'

'But it might be a lying spirit,' said Ailie. 'It might be to tempt us—as if you and me had need of alliance in the flesh.'

'We have need of alliance for the work,' he said, with his great, heavy, passionate eyes fixed upon her. 'Men have gone before, but never man and woman. The Lord has said to me, Go in to the prophetess. Fear not to take unto thee thy wife. If you disobey, the sin be upon your head.'

'But it has never been revealed to me,' cried Ailie, her cheeks crimsoning with shame, and whitening with terror. 'When there have been messages concerning this life, they have been revealed to them that were to profit, and no to another. And in the mouth of two or three is every testimony to be established. If the word comes to me I'll no resist the Lord.'

'The head of the woman is her husband,' said Mr. John, loftily, 'it is the sign of God's will towards you. If you are to be given to me, your instructions, your directions, must come through my hands. It is to me it is revealed, for I am the head. Listen to the Lord's voice. Want of faith has laid one head low that should have shone above us all. Will you let it overcome you now that have triumphed in your time? Ailie, beware! The blasphemy that cannot be pardoned, and the sin that may not be forgiven, is the sin against the Holy Ghost.'

'But I canna see it! I canna see it!' cried poor Ailie, bursting into tears. Her dignity seemed to have deserted her, and all her spiritual gifts. She kept indoors, shut up in her room, spending her time in feverish prayers and divinations from the Bible. 'I will do what the Lord wills,' she said to herself and others twenty times in a day; but when any text which seemed to favour Mr. John's cause caught her eye on opening 'the Book,' she would shut it again hastily, and try again, without any acknowledgment. All her partizans, and indeed the entire parish, took an interest in the question which no previous features in the movement had elicited to such an extent. The matter was discussed everywhere, involving as it did the interest of a personal romance along with the intense charm of the religious excitement, and calling forth a hundred different opinions. There were some who thought that Ailie—'set her up!'—had won what she aimed at in making herself so conspicuous, and that her reluctance was pretence. And there were some who, without going so far, still felt that the promotion of a gentleman's hand thus offered to her, was enough to make the prophetess forget her calling. Miss Catherine, who was of a sceptical mind, and had never given in to Ailie's pretensions, was so much moved by her kinsman's madness, that it almost broke down the barrier which had divided them since the time when Mr. John's evil ways had finally closed her doors against him. She even hesitated at the church-door whether she would not pause and accost him, and see what reason could do to turn him from his fatal intention; but was deterred by the haggard look, the watery bloodshot eyes, the parched and feverish lips, which struck her like a revelation. 'I understand it all now,' she said, so much agitated by the supposed discovery, that she went in tremulous to the Manse, to recover herself. 'It is not a common failing among us Diarmids of the old stock—but that accounts for everything. And as for arguing with a man in that state—'

'You mistake,' said the minister; 'indeed you mistake.'

Miss Catherine shook her head. 'Well I know the

signs of it,' she said; 'it is not a failing of the race, but when it comes it is all the worse for that. The unhappy lad! One would think that the words of Scripture came true, and that such a man was delivered over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.'

'He has been wrong, no doubt; but not in that way,' said Mr. Lothian. 'It is grief—despair if you like; and all this excitement, and agitation, and sickness, which he will not give in to—but not what you suppose.'

Once more Miss Catherine shook her head. 'He is but a distant cousin, thank God,' she said to herself. But yet he was related nearly enough to throw upon the house of Lochhead a certain share of the responsibility. 'I am glad his poor mother is safe in her grave,' she added; 'ye preach, and ye preach, you ministers, but ye never will persuade the young what a weary wilderness this world is, nor the old that there's anything but tribulation and sorrow in it. Will ye marry them when all is done and said?'

This question was asked so abruptly, that Mr. Lothian was startled. 'Marry whom?' he asked.

'Those I am speaking of: John Diarmid and that lass. Is it a thing you can bless, you that are an honest man, and know your duty, and have some experience in this world?'

'My dear Miss Catherine,' said the minister, 'you have too much experience yourself not to know that if they've made up their minds it will make little difference what I do or what I think. I have no right to say they are not to marry if they please.'

'No; I wish you had,' said Miss Catherine, rising: 'and I wish there was some kind of a real government, or some control, that men should not be left to make fools of themselves and put shame upon an old name whenever they please.'

'She is not his equal,' said Mr. Lothian, 'but there is no shame.'

Miss Catherine marched out of the Manse gates strenuously shaking her head. 'A lass that has preached and prayed and ranted in a public place!' she said, with a mixture of lofty indignation and contempt, shaking out her great shawl and rustling her silk gown, so that the minister felt himself buried and lost in their shadow. And she continued to shake her head as she went majestically alone down the slope and took her way home through the village.

When the minister was left by himself at his own gate a sudden impulse seized him to interfere in this delicate matter; or perhaps not to interfere—but at least to exercise that privilege of curiosity or interest which a

clergyman, like a woman, is permitted to feel. He went up the brae towards the little line of cottages where Ailie lived, with kindness in his heart to the visionary girl, notwithstanding all her recent denunciations of his lukewarmness and interference with his business. Half way up, he met Mr. John coming down in his rapid, excited, breathless way. The two men paused and came to a stop opposite to each other, without for the first moment any attempt to speak. Mr. Lothian was half alarmed when he saw the ravages which so short a time had wrought on the enthusiast's face. He himself looked young and ruddy beside John Diarmid, who must have been at least a dozen years his junior. There were deep lines under his eyes and about his haggard mouth; his cheeks were hollow, his eyes seemed increased in size as well as in fire; and a beard, a wonder in those days, the only symptom by which he had betrayed the languor of the fever which had been consuming him, covered the lower part of his face. This beard had been visible at church that morning for the first time to the general public, and the parish had involuntarily looked with distrust upon its prophet when they saw that symptom of eccentricity on his chin. But Mr. Lothian was not so easily shocked. Nevertheless, it was Mr. John who was the first to speak.

'You will soon be free of us,' he said, in his deep voice; 'the time of the visitation of Loch Diarmid is nearly at an end. Him that is unworthy let him be unworthy still. We'll hand them back to you and your sermons. A greater work is opening before us now.'

'If you will tell me what it is, I will be glad,' said Mr. Lothian. 'I have heard, but vaguely. Where are you going? and with whom? and to whom? You are not a villager, like the rest, Mr John, but know the world.'

'I have bought my knowledge dear,' he said; 'but I've offered it all up on the altar with the rest. I make no stand on my knowledge of the world. Henceforward we know no man after the flesh. I answer you, we are going to the world; the Lord will direct us where.'

'But will you start,' cried the minister, 'and with a young woman unused to such fatigue on no better indication than that?'

'The same indication that Israel had—the pillar of cloud by day and the banner of light by night. But I cannot discuss it with a carnal mind. The Lord will direct where we are to go.'

'And that is all?'

'That is all; if you had fathomed Heaven and earth, could you know more than that, or have a guidance more sure?'

'Mr. John,' said Mr. Lothian, with a certain impatience; 'you know so much better than the rest. Whatever they take into their heads they will believe in: but you, who are a man of the world——'

Mr. John gave a sweep of his hand as if it were to say, 'Get thee behind me, Satan,' and passed his questioner. 'I am the servant of the Lord,' he said. There was in the man's look, in his nervous movements, in the extraordinary absorbed expression of his face, such a sense of the reality of his extraordinary purpose that the minister found not another word to say. He paused and looked after the wayfarer making his way, absorbed and intent upon his own thoughts, down the hill. It was no vulgar enthusiasm at which a man of higher training might smile. By whatsoever process Mr. John had arrived at it—whether it was all honest throughout, or if there had been any deception to begin with, it was sufficiently true now. He at least believed in his own mission. Mr. Lothian turned and continued his way with a sigh. There is something in such fervour of conviction which moves the mature, experienced man of thought to a certain envy. No inducement in the world could have moved the minister to such straightforward, downright belief in any mission of reformation. 'Therefore, I will never move a multitude,' he said to himself, 'and who knows——'

Who knows? I am a fool for Christ's sake, said Paul who was no fool. Was not there something divine in the conviction, even if that were all?

When the minister reached the cottages on the brae, the first thing that caught his eye was Ailie standing at the open door, her face contracted as if with pain, and her hands clasped fast in each other with a certain beseeching gesture like a silent prayer. There was no conviction in Ailie's face. In the Sabbath quiet, when all the world had retired into their houses, the prophetess stood—'as if it was an every-day,' her mother said, who felt the dereliction keenly—at the open door. The girl's face was full of doubt and trouble and nervous disquietude. The man who claimed to share her fate had just left her. He had been fulminating into her ear once more 'the message of the Lord.' He had upbraided her for her doubt, her love which was failing from the love of espousals, her strength which was growing weary in the way. 'That lack of faith with which she had reproached Margaret Diarmid was now imputed to herself. And Mr John had left the prophetess who was to him 'the sister, the wife,' of apostolic precedent, quivering all over with

wounded pride and feeling. Poor Ailie did not know it was pride. She believed it was the tenderness of conscience, the tenderness of heart, which could not bear to feel itself guilty of the ingratitude imputed to her. But she was sore and wounded, not knowing how to bear it, fighting blindly against what it was more and more evident must be the will of God and her fate.

'Ailie!' said Mr. Lothian, looking at her with kind, fatherly eyes. It was true he was Isabel's lover, strange even to himself as such a position was; but in presence of every other woman in the world, he was a man growing old, a man calm and sobered, fully sensible of his age. 'Ailie, I have come to ask for you, though it is long since I have seen you of your own will. You have higher pretensions nowadays; but still you are one of my flock——'

Ailie lifted upon him her lucid, visionary eyes which were full of a certain despair. 'Oh, aye, oh, aye!' she said; 'I'm but one of the flock. I thought I had the Spirit of the Lord. But the oracle's dumb and the books are closed. Oh, minister, you're no a man of light, but I think in your heart you're a man of God. If you were required to walk in a new path, and had nae instruction given to your ain soul, what would ye do—what would ye do?'

Mr. Lothian was brought to a stand-still by the eagerness in her eyes, and the pathos in her voice. He was in earnest, it is true, in wishing her well, and yet in pursuing his own religious way. But he was not in such deadly earnest as this. It was not a matter of life and death to him to come to a certain conclusion on any one point that remained to be considered in life. And in the calm of his age he could scarcely understand the young creature's passionate eagerness. He faltered a little in his answer. 'Ailie,' he said, as any other man of his years would have done, 'I would consider which was best.'

Ailie, who had been gazing wistfully at him, as if with some new hope, turned away her head suddenly, throwing up her hands with an expression of despair. 'The best!' she cried; 'God's way is aefold, and no many. His will is one, and has to be done. Oh, ye that think ye can shift and dally to please Him this way or that way. Am I asking which is best? Can ye no wake out of your sloth and open the eyes of your spirit and tell me what's the will of God?'

She had expected no answer, and indeed turned from him leaning her head against the portal of the humble door. But the minister felt himself called upon to speak.

'Nature is God's servant as well as you and me,' he said, 'and Nature is speaking against this, Ailie—speaking loud. Whatsoever leads ye from your natural duties and affection, you may be sure is not the will of God.'

Ailie raised her head and looked at him, wondering beyond expression to find herself so admonished. 'I've nae duties but to follow God's will,' she said; 'to follow Him to the end of the earth. Oh, if I could but open the way of the Lord to you and the like of you. Nature's but a poor handmaid of His grace, no a mistress nor a guide. Oh, man, with your grey head, that should ken what God's service is, how can you speak of nature to me?'

'And what if it were that you wanted to consider above all else?' said the minister, laying his kind hand on her shoulder. Ailie put him aside without a word. A little shudder seemed to run through her at his touch. If it was her ecstasy that was coming upon her, or if it was merely a movement of the nature which she defied, Mr. Lothian could not tell; but she passed him thus, taking no further notice, and glided across the road like a ghost to the heathery braes which stretched away into the distance.

'As if it were but an every-day,' said her mother, who appeared in the passage behind, ready to pour out a flood of troubles into the minister's ear. The Sabbath-day was a more rigorous institution in Scotland then than now, and the inhabitants of the surrounding cottages, most of whom would have considered a Sunday walk, which was not a work of necessity, to be something like a crime, looked on perturbed, and not knowing what to make of it, when Ailie, thus driven by the intensity of her feelings, sought solitude and counsel on the hill.

'There's Ailie away across the braes,' cried a weary young prisoner in one of the neighbours' houses. 'It canna be a sin. Oh, let me go too!'

'Are ye a prophet of the Lord like Ailie?' said the mother with fierce contempt. The Holy Maid was above those laws which weighed so rigorously upon 'common folk.'

CHAPTER XXII

AILIE went forth, not to seek counsel of flesh and blood, but to lay, as she would have said, her 'burden before the Lord.' Her eyes were bent upon the ground, for her heart was heavy; her mind was full of a wandering chaos of thoughts, through which she sought in vain for

anything which she could take as an indication of the will of God.

The braes lay lonely under the faint occasional glimpses of a watery sun. It was Sabbath all over the silent country; something exceptionally still marked the exceptional day. The little steamer that fumed and fretted up the Loch every afternoon about this hour was of course invisible, and so were the boats which for use or pleasure dotted the water on week-days, and added one characteristic sound to the usual noises. The people going home from church had all disappeared. Nothing moved except the blue smoke from the cottage-roofs, and sometimes a shy rabbit or invisible wild creature among the high heather. And yet by and by even Ailie, absorbed as she was, became aware that she was not the only wanderer on the hill-side. Under the birch-tree, someone sat crouched together, whose heart was full, like her own, of many thoughts. There was but one creature on the Loch who was likely to seek such a hermitage. Perhaps had Ailie's thoughts been at their usual strain she would never have remarked her companion; but earthly things had come in to confuse the current of her imagination; and a certain sense of companionship, and even of possible help, came to her. 'She's but a simple thing,' was her first idea, and then, 'She's Margret's sister,' the young enthusiast added to herself. Ah, blessed Margaret! maiden Margaret! whom Ailie had striven to keep out of that quiet, sheltering grave and to deliver to all those cares of life which for the first time had now come upon herself. She drew close to Margaret's sister with a faint throb of expectation. 'Am I to judge whence the word may come?' she said to herself. 'Is it not out of the mouths of babes and sucklings that He perfects praise?'

Isabel had not yet made her appearance at church to her stepmother's infinite distress, though it was one of the unalterable etiquettes of rural life 'after a death.' The wilful girl had declared with tears that she could not bear it. 'With everybody looking, and looking, and all the folk going past, that used to stop and say, How is she? It would break my heart,' said Isabel. And she had stolen out to the braes when Jean and the children returned from church, feeling the silence a consolation to her.

At that moment she was more absorbed in her thoughts than Ailie, being hopeless and expecting no consolation or deliverance; and when the rustle of the heather caught her ear, and looking up she saw Ailie's slender figure standing over her, a movement of impatience woke in Isabel's mind. Nobody could give

her any comfort, could they not then leave her alone? It was all she asked. To be left to brood over the ending of her early, lonely life and all her dreams. This was all that now remained to her. To others, life renewed itself, changed its fashions, put forth new blossoms, extended, full of light and hope, into the future; but hers was over. Could they not have the charity to leave her at least alone?

'Is it you, Isabel?' said Ailie, coming to her side.

'Aye, it's me. I thought I was sure to be alone here. Do you take your walks all the same on the Sabbath day?'

'To me a' days are the same,' said Ailie. 'If I ken mysel I have nae desire but to ay be doing my Master's business. Sabbath or every day, I make no difference. And the silence is fine, and the air sweet to-day, like every day.'

'It is not silence now,' said Isabel, with the fitful, hasty temper for which, as soon as the words were said, she was sorry and penitent.

'No,' said Ailie, from whom the great perplexity she was in had taken much of her solemn aspect. 'It's no silence now, and whiles there are better things than silence. Isabel, when I saw ye among the heather, I felt that the Lord sent ye to give me an answer in my trouble. It's like drawing the lot; and I've done that o'er and o'er by myself, and I canna see it. But you, you're innocent, and ken nothing about him or me. I'll draw the lot at you, Isabel. I'm no saying it to make you vain. It's because you're young, and soft, and no learned in the ways of this world, but like a little bairn. Isabel,' said the young prophetess, kneeling down suddenly at her side, and gazing into her face with those visionary eyes which were wild in their pathos, 'am I to do what he bids, or no?'

The question raised Isabel out of her personal brooding. She was startled—almost frightened by the vehemence of the appeal. 'Oh! how can I tell you, or what do you want me to say?' she said, clasping her hands; and then she remembered what she had heard about Ailie and Mr. John, and shrank at the thought of the responsibility thus placed in her hands.

'Tell me aye or no,' said Ailie, gazing so into her face, into her eyes, that Isabel's very soul was moved. She bore the look as long as she could, and then she covered her face with her hands.

'Your eyes go through and through me,' she said, 'and I cannot judge for you. I am not like her that is gone. I am but Isabel. I cannot guide myself. And you that have more light than all the rest—how should I help you?'

'I am giving no reasons,' said Ailie, 'it's no a time for reasons. It's out of the mouth of babes and sucklings—Isabel, say aye or no?'

'Then I'll say aye,' said Isabel, suddenly lifting her head with a gleam of her old impatience. It was far from being spoken like an oracle of God. It was uttered hastily, with a certain nervous distaste to being thus questioned. But when she saw the effect her words produced, her heart failed her. Ailie sank down helplessly on the road. She did not faint, as Isabel, being somewhat pre-occupied by her own first experience of bodily weakness, thought. She sank down in a heap without making an effort or a struggle. Every tint of colour fled from her face. Her eyes, which alone seemed to have any life left in them, were raised with a look of such reproach as made her hasty adviser tremble. But Ailie did not say a word. She lay with the air of one stunned and helpless among the heather. Then after the first minute a sob came from her lips. Isabel was overcome by her own fears.

'Oh, Ailie!' she cried, 'I meant nothing. Why should you put such weight on what I say? I was impatient, and I said the first word that came to me. I did not mean it. I meant No instead. Oh, Ailie, will you listen now to what I say?'

'When I'm come to myself,' said Ailie, waving her hand. Her voice was so low as scarcely to be audible. Then her pale lips moved, though no sound came from them at first; and her eyes turned upward with such an expression of submission and pain, as Isabel had never seen. 'No my will,' Ailie murmured, with her hands holding her breast, 'no my will, but Thine.' It was a voice as of despair, when a little thrill of renewed vigour made it audible. Awe stole over her companion, whose careless words had done it. Isabel, in her self-reproach, rose up from her seat in haste. She took off the shawl in which she was wrapped, and kneeling down beside Ailie endeavoured to place it under her. She put her arms round her with a remorse that made an end of pride. 'Oh, Ailie, I meant nothing! It was my hasty way,' she cried, bending over her, kissing her even in her eagerness. Ailie did not resist the soft caress. She laid her head down upon Isabel's shoulder, and closed her eyes, which were strained and painful with so much emotion. 'My soul is poured out as water—my strength hath He weakened in the way,' she said, leaning back with closed eyes. The struggle was over. She had resisted long; but in this fantastic way at last she had satisfied herself, and would struggle no more.

And thus the soft air breathed on them, and the still

moments passed over those two young creatures, clinging to each other among the silence of the hills, with the sorest ache in their hearts which each had ever known. Isabel in her fright had almost forgotten hers. She sat embracing Ailie who leant upon her, and wondering what it was which had moved the girl so strangely to the exclusion of her own thoughts, which had been bitter enough. Once before Isabel had spoken in her haste, and her voice had been taken for an oracle of God. She had never forgotten the awful sense that, had she but held out and struggled against utterance, Margaret's life might have been spared; she had given way to her feelings then and again now; and what was it that she had done this time?—something which she had never anticipated and did not yet understand. In her trouble she spoke, with a voice that trembled, closely in her companion's ear.

'O Ailie, you are not to mind! I was not thinking what you meant or what it was. I said the first thing that came into my head, as I am always doing. Ailie, tell me what it is and then we'll think—we'll try and see what is best.'

'No,' said Ailie, faintly, 'it wasna that I wanted. I wanted but one word, the first that came into your head. It was drawing the lot. If you had kent what I meant it would have been different. No, it's a' past. I've struggled and fought in my mind like a profane person. It has ay been the same in the Book itself; whiles one word, whiles another; but ay saying, "Yes, yes"—ay about the bridegroom and the bride. But I said to myself, the next time it will be different. And now there's you. I thought She'll say No, the innocent thing. She'll divine by my eyes that my heart's broken. And you didna look at me, Isabel, to let yourself be turned away, but said what was put into your mind.'

'Is it about you and Mr. John?' said Isabel, bending down to her ear.

A shudder ran through Ailie's frame. 'Ay,' she said, with a long sobbing sigh. 'But if it's the Lord's will, nae man shall hear me say a word more. And, Isabel, if it come to pass, and ye see him and me together as we'll have to be, you'll not take any notice; what I must do I will do to the full, and no in part.'

'But, O Ailie! you'll never do it; you must not do it—if you don't love him!' said Isabel.

She shrank and hesitated to say the word. It seemed to her a kind of blasphemy.

'Could I have said it to Margaret?' she asked herself. And was not Ailie, too, like Margaret, a dedicated virgin, above such suggestions of this common earth?

'Oh, whisht!' said Ailie, with a wild, sudden flush of colour flaming over her face. 'Whatever the Lord's will may be, I am His handmaid to do it. But, eh! how I'm punished now! I wouldna let your Margaret be. I would bid her back to earth when she was at Heaven's door—no thinking what was waiting for myself. Though I'm no murmuring against the Lord.'

And then there was a moment of silence, on the one side full of eager revolt and determination to oppose; on the other of that stunned submission which comes after a great blow.

'Oh, no—no! it cannot be,' cried Isabel, clasping in her arms the girl for whom, up to this moment, she had felt so little sympathy. 'I will never believe it is God's meaning. If you did not love him you would hate him. How could you help it? It cannot be—it must not be!'

'Whisht—whisht!' said Ailie, with a faint momentary smile, 'you're ay so earnest. Oh, if ye would come with us, Isabel, for *her* sake, and put yourself on the Lord's side. Whisht!—What's God's doing can never harm His servants. I'm no rebelling now, that's a' past. The worst is I canna see my work, nor what remains for me in this world,' she added, with a piteous gentleness, 'for the spirit of prophecy is ta'en from me as would be fit, when I'm under another, and no free in my ain power. Or, maybe, it's my een that are blinded,' she said, putting her hand up to them with a close pressure, as if they ached. But it was not because they ached. It was because they were full of overflowing with a stinging salt moisture. She would not yield to that common mode of relief. 'Why should I greet when the Lord's will is manifest?' she said, all at once. 'It would more suit me to greet if I knew not what that was.'

'But it cannot be God's will and you so sore—sore against it,' cried eager Isabel, 'in your heart.'

'I'm no such a rebel,' cried Ailie, with a start. 'Oh, I'm no so ill as you think—me that am set to be a sign to His people. Now it's all past,' she added, raising herself up. 'And, Isabel, though you dinna understand, you've been real good to me, and I'll never forget it. Oh, will ye no come and open your heart now to the Lord, as long as the day of visitation lasts? I canna bide to think that Margret's sister should be on the world's side, and no on the Lord's.'

'I never was on the world's side,' said Isabel, with something of her natural impatience, rising, as Ailie did so, to her feet.

'He that is not with us is against us,' said the young prophetess. 'O Isabel! Dinna trust in the good that's just nature. The day is near past—the night is at hand.'

And you thinking of love, and pleasure, and the delights of this life, and no of that awfu' day.'

'Delights!' said Isabel, holding up the heavy crape on her dress to the intent eye which remarked no such homely particulars; and then she turned hastily and went away—partly irritated, partly weary. She had forgotten her own burden to minister to the other. And she had need of consolation and encouragement herself, not of weariness and excitement. She turned, as was her hasty way, and left the visionary creature standing behind her on the hill. Ailie stood and gazed after the rapid, retreating figure, not offended as in a different region of society she might have been. This parting *sans façon* was not extraordinary among the homely country folk. She stood and looked after her with a wistful interest, stronger than any human sentiment which perhaps had ever before crossed her mind. A girl free to live her natural life, free to make her natural choice, bound by no mysterious rules, prepared to no awful office as God's ambassador to man—

There was a meeting the same night. Ailie shut herself up for all the afternoon of this memorable day. She went into the little room, at the window of which, in the middle of the night, Mr. John's extraordinary proposal had been first made to her, and placed her open Bible on her bed, and knelt down before it. There she remained, fasting, in one long trance of prayer and reverie, while the short autumn day came to an end, and the twilight closed round her. Had her fate been to go to the stake on the morrow, her preparation for it would have been triumphant in comparison. But the stake could not have been a more supreme proof of her devotion to the service of God than was this act of submission to what she believed His will. She accepted the bitter cup from God's hand, and made no further struggle against her fate.

When the hour for the meeting came, Ailie wrapped herself in her plaid and went out alone down the dark road. Her mother was in weak health, and, with that strange diversity which is so often met with in life, was a homely, sober woman, who thought there were 'far ower mony meetings,' and was more scandalised than flattered by the prominent position taken by her daughter in them. There was a little controversy between them before Ailie went out, over a cup of tea, which the anxious mother importuned her child to take. 'O Ailie! do you mean to break my heart and murder yourself?' she said. 'Neither bit nor sup has crossed your lips since morning. You've been ower nigh death to be that careless of your health—if it were but for your puir

auld faither's sake, that canna bear ye out of his sight.'

'I couldna swallow it,' said Ailie; 'and he'll have to bear the want of me. I must forsake father and mother for the work of the Lord.'

'Oh, lassie, ye make my heart sick,' said the mother: 'as if the Lord couldna do His ain work without the help of a bit lass like you.'

But Janet's mind did not dwell on the words. Such words were usual enough in the highflown, religious phraseology of the moment, and the 'work of the Lord' might mean no more than a series of meetings, or retirements to her room for prayer. Neither was the mother alarmed by Mr. John's proposal. It was 'an awfu' compliment;' but in her heart she felt that even a special revelation could not make such a *mésalliance* possible; and that rather than suffer such an extraordinary downfall, the aristocracy of the clan Diarmid would procure some powerful remonstrance with Heaven itself against such a removal of all natural boundaries. 'Na, na, Miss Catherine will never allow it,' she had said when she heard; though a thrill of natural pride went through her. 'If she would take a little pains with herself, and put up her hair like the rest, our Ailie is a bonnie lass,' the mother had added to herself, not without complacency, 'But, na, na, it couldna be.'

The meeting was to be held that night on the south side of the Loch, in a barn reluctantly granted by Mr. Smeaton for the accommodation of the prophets. Before entering it, Ailie went into the cottage of the shepherd who lived close at hand. There she found Mr. John seated by the fire, along with several leaders of the movement. There was no other light in the room, and he sat with his dark head, relieved against the blaze, leaning on his hands. The others were talking around him, arranging their little services, exchanging experiences; but Mr. John sat silent and took no part among them. Ailie went up to him, penetrating through the group. She held out her hand to him, standing before the fire.

'It shall be as you say,' she said with a voice which almost failed her at the last.

Mr. John turned round and gazed up at her for a moment, the ruddy light shining in his face, as it did in hers. He was dark and haggard in that illumination, she very pale, and with a look of exhaustion on her face. He took her hand and held it for a moment, and then he let it drop out of his.

'You acknowledge the Word of the Lord, at last?' he said, almost with severity. And then he sprang up and interposed in the order that was being arranged for

the services, with a nervous hurriedness which struck her strangely. She had thought that, perhaps, he at least would be glad. But he was not glad. He rushed into the discussion which he had retired from with an unwonted eagerness. Thus Fate had caught them both in her net. And though Mr. John had set his heart on this thing, it filled him with such an acute pang now he had gained it, that only instant movement and occupation prevented him from betraying himself. But the meeting of that night was such an 'outpouring' as few people present had ever known before. A feverish earnestness filled them, born of the very excess of pain.

'Eh, but Ailie was awfu' grand to-night,' the people said. 'Eh, if you had but heard Mr. John!' They were both in a half-craze of misery, speaking like people in a dream. And thus, as the assembly foresaw, everything was settled that night.

CHAPTER XXIII

IT was an event of which the country-side remained incredulous, until the very last moment. The strange pair were 'cried' in church, both being present when the banns were proclaimed, in defiance of all superstition; but still no one believed it could be. Ailie sat passive in her seat while her name was read out, not a passing flicker of colour, not an indication of embarrassment being visible about her. And, to the amazement of the parish, no attempt at interference was made. Miss Catherine sat still within her ancestral palace, the homely mansion-house of Lochhead, like an offended queen. She absented herself from church on the Sunday of the banns, and was not seen of human eye until all was completed; but she made no attempt to interfere. Neither did Mr. Diarmid of Clynder on the other side of the hills, Mr. John's uncle. The opposition which everybody had expected never made itself visible.

Meanwhile Isabel, profoundly moved by her interview with Ailie, and by all that had since occurred, had made up her mind to one final remonstrance ere the sacrifice should be accomplished. When she had said to Jean, 'I am going to see Ailie,' the good woman's consternation had known no bounds. Not only was the condescension unparalleled, but it was not to be expected that Isabel, as a lady born, and entitled to the possession of feelings more delicate than those of 'common folk,' should yet be able to pay any visits even among her equals. 'Ailie!'

she remonstrated energetically; 'and wha's Ailie, that you should gang to see her at such a time? She's no John Diarmid's wife yet; and if she was——'

'That is why I must see her,' said Isabel. 'She must never marry that man!'

Upon which Jean uttered the usual comment half in scorn and half in indignation. 'Set her up! I would like to ken what right she has to ony such man.'

'She does not want him,' said Isabel. 'She'll go and marry him and break her heart. Oh, I must go! If they were cried yesterday there is no time to lose.'

'They're to be married the morn,' said Jean. 'And if that is what you have set your heart on, wait till I've gotten on my Sunday bonnet. I'll gang with ye myself.'

'It is not necessary,' said Isabel.

'Bell, my bonnie woman,' said her stepmother, 'I ken better what is needful than you do. It's no a moment to have you wandering on the road your lane.'

And thus it was that Jean found herself in the midst of the village group, while Isabel penetrated into Ailie's cottage. The young prophetess was seated, silent, with a sombre fire in her eye, dejected yet excited, when Isabel was ushered in by her anxious mother. Janet had begun to take alarm about her daughter's aspect; but such an honour as the visit of the Captain's Isabel, no doubt paid to the prospective Mrs. Diarmid of Ardnamore, was a foreshadowing of greatness to come which went to her heart.

'Ailie, my woman!' she said. 'Here's Isabel from the Glebe. It's most kind of her to come and see you, and I hope you'll let her see you think it kind.'

'Isabel!' said Ailie, dreamily; she was sitting on the side of her bed, pondering over her little Bible. 'Oh, aye, mother, I'm glad to see her; if she'll come ben.'

'Let me speak to her alone,' Isabel had begged at the door; and the mother, half pleased yet half doubtful, withdrew with wistful looks. If perhaps the mission of the mourner might be to reconcile Ailie with the wonderful match she was making; and yet, again, a fanciful young girl might do her harm.

'I've come to speak to you before it is all over,' said Isabel. 'O, Ailie, you mind what you said to me? You are not happy. You are not looking happy; and yet they say you're to be married——'

'The morn,' said Ailie, mechanically.

'To-morrow!' repeated Isabel, carefully choosing her words, to be more impressive; 'and yet you are not happy. Ailie, Ailie, it must not be!'

'What's God's will must be,' she said; 'happy is neither here nor there;' and began again to turn over the leaves of the small Bible she held in her hands.

'He is going to take you away,' said Isabel, 'where none of your friends perhaps will ever see you more; where you will be all alone with none but him, and no love for him in your heart. Oh, Ailie, listen! you will hate him if ye cannot love him. I could not rest; I've been in no strange house till now *since*—but I could not rest. Oh, Ailie, God would not have you to be miserable; that can never be His will. You are wiser than me, but you have ay been thinking of other folk, and not of what was in your own heart.'

'Little but deceitfulness and wickedness,' said Ailie, musing, 'well I know; and a root of bitterness in the best. But, Isabel, there's no a word to say. It's no in my own hands. It was settled and ordained before you or me were born.'

'And nothing will make you change your mind?'

'It's no my mind I'm speaking of,' she said, with a half-despairing smile; 'if it was me to decide! But whisht! whisht! and say no more; my mother is coming. I've had ill thoughts and thankless thoughts, and you've seen them, Isabel; but I'm the handmaid o' the Lord, and it's no to His glory to betray my weakness—no even to my mother.'

'I'll not betray you,' cried Isabel, with a little natural heat. Ailie turned wearily away, with a sigh of languor and heaviness; and just then her mother came bustling in, carrying a white muslin dress on her extended arms.

'It's no to call grand,' said Janet, 'but I thought you would like to see it. As for Ailie, she takes nae mair notice than if a wedding was a thing that happened every day.'

'She's so full of her own thoughts,' said Isabel, instinctively attempting an excuse.

'Thoughts are grand things,' said Mrs. Macfarlane, 'and our Ailie, as is weel kent, is a lass far out of the ordinar. But her wedding-gown! A woman made out of stone would take an interest in that! I would be real thankful if you would put some real feeling in her mind.'

'She has done her best,' said Ailie, still bending absorbed over her book; 'but I'm thinking of the Lord's will, and no of men's pleasure. My black gown that I wear every day is good enough for me.'

'Hear to her!' said the mother; 'but eh, Isabel, you that's young yoursel, ye might tell her this earth is nearer than Heaven, and that we maun take some thought for the things of the flesh.'

'Do you think she's happy?' said Isabel, wistfully, feeling the full misery of this indifference, and yet bound by honour not to reveal what she knew of Ailie's mind.

'Happy!' echoed Janet. 'with Ardnamore waiting to

make a lady of her? What would she get better in this world? And I hope you'll no put nonsense in her head. It would just break my heart.'

'I'll put no nonsense in her head,' said Isabel. And then, surmounting her irritation, she added, 'But oh, think if she were to be unhappy, and away in the world with nobody to comfort her.'

The mother turned away with a little laugh. 'Simple thing!' she said, under her breath, 'you're like hersel; ye take it a' for gospel, every word they say.'

'Are they not going away?' asked Isabel in amaze.

'Oh, aye, they're going away; but think ye the world's like Loch Diarmid, Isabel? They'll soon tire o' their preaching and their wandering among fremd folk. She's a' spirit and little flesh, my poor lamb. And her heart will fail her, and he'll be sick o't a', and syne they'll come cannily hame. And I'll see my bairn at kirk and market, with her bairns about her—no a common body like me,' said Janet, wiping her eyes with her apron, 'but a leddy of Ardnamore.'

'But she'll break her heart,' said Isabel.

'I'm no feared for her heart,' said the mother. 'She's a loving thing, though you wouldna think it. Her heart will turn to her husband when she has nane but him.'

This was Janet's programme of the strange romance. Isabel, though she was not used to contrasts of this description, went down the hill in a maze of reflections, wondering over the difference. Ailie's tragic purpose of going forth into the world to save it, her first step being upon her own heart, and all its maiden hopes; and her mother's frightful, sceptical, middle-aged prescience of the effects of weariness and failure—the inevitable disappointment, the sickening of heart, the giving up of hope, the despairing flight homeward to seek peace at least and quietness—stood before her side by side like two pictures. Would the two enthusiasts content themselves with common life and comfort after their high dreams, or was there, after all, nothing in the dreams for which Ailie was making so awful a sacrifice? Isabel was too inexperienced to come to light on the subject; but Janet Macfarlane's cheerful unbelief struck her with mingled horror and pain. She did not ask herself whether all that was beautiful and wonderful in the hopes and beliefs of beginning life was thus looked upon by the calm eyes of the elders as so much delusion to be dispersed by the winds and storms. But that suggestion of insecurity, unreality—and of the better-informed spectator, who realised and knew the downfall that was coming—appalled and terrified her. The sight of Mr. Lothian, who came out from the Mansegate as she

passed, was, perhaps for the first time, a relief to Isabel. She was glad to have him come to her, to hear his sympathetic voice, to feel that there were people in the world who were not sceptical. 'I have been seeing Ailie,' she said, accounting half-apologetically for the little shiver of nervous excitement which she could not restrain.

'And now you'll come and see Miss Catherine,' said Mr. Lothian. 'You cannot help the one, but you can help the other, Isabel.'

'Me help Miss Catherine? No, Mr. Lothian,' said Isabel, with a little air of dignity. 'She is never pleased, whatever I do. She would like me to pretend to be somebody else, and not myself.'

'And I am so foolish,' said the minister, with a smile. 'as to like yourself best of all; and so does she, Isabel, if you saw her heart. You'll come and see her with me.'

'To please you,' said the girl not meaning any coquetry, nor thinking of the tenderness with which words so unusually soft moved this man, who might have been her father. Even as she spoke her eye caught some passing figure in the distance, which was like that of the lover whom she fancied she had abjured; and her heart sprang up and began to beat furiously against her breast. She knew very well it was not Stapylton—but the merest vision that reminded her of him, how different was the feeling it awakened within her! She walked on leisurely by Mr. Lothian's side, making him soft answers, which, in spite of all his better knowledge, filled him with a sweet intoxication. And all the time her object was to lead him artfully with all the youthful skill of which she was mistress to some allusion to her lover. 'Are you glad to be alone?' she said at last, stooping as she did so, to pluck off a thorny branch which had caught her dress. And he did not even perceive what that leading question meant, so wrapt was he in the delusion which—half-intentionally in her unconscious selfishness for her own purposes—she had been weaving round him.

'I would not be glad to be alone if I could have the company I like best,' said the deluded man; and so, deceiver and deceived, they went along the quiet rural way.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHEN Isabel found herself once more in the drawing-room at Lochhead, it wrought the most curious change upon her. She sat almost silent, while Miss Catherine and the minister talked, but with a mind awaking to all the influences about her—the grace, the superior softness, the refinement of the place. Life here must,

it seemed to Isabel, be a different thing from the life she had always known. There were books of all kinds about, and her appetite for books was great, though as yet it had been but scantily supplied. The ample window gave an amount of atmosphere and breadth to the room, which Isabel perceived by instinct, without knowing how it was. It was very nearly the same view as that from the parlour window at the Glebe, and she could not tell what made the difference; unless indeed it was the superior grandeur, splendour, amplitude of the life. There were a hundred resources within, which were impossible at her lower level of existence, and a much widened perception of the world without. She had no notion that it was the old furniture and the great windows which impressed this so strangely upon her. It was something in the atmosphere, the expanded breathing, and hearing, and seeing of a larger life.

And as the minister accompanied her home, Isabel, unawares, fell into a little self-revelation. 'You can see the same view out of the village windows,' she said, 'and from the Glebe; but the Loch is grander and the braes are higher, and away down to Clyde is like a picture—I don't know how it is.'

'You like it better than the Glebe?'

'I cannot tell,' said Isabel; 'it is so different; and so many things to fill your life. I think I would never tire reading; but then I know my books off by heart, and reading them is little good. And there's always a seam. I know a seam is *right*,' said Isabel, with decision; 'I did not mean that.'

'But sometimes you would like something else,' he said, growing foolish as he looked at her; and finding something half-divine in her girlish simplicity.

'I don't know,' she said; 'I have made up my mind to be content. But still one has eyes, and one can see it is different. I never thought—of such things—before.' And a rush of tears came to her pensive eyes.

Mr. Lothian left her finally at the door of the Glebe, and found himself in such a state of *attendrissement* that he rushed in once more upon Miss Catherine as he passed the house. 'Life is beginning to stir within her,' he said with excitement; 'she is feeling that all is not over and past. The sight of you has done her good.'

'The sight of me is not difficult to be had,' said Miss Catherine, 'though it's early yet, after a death, to get good from the like of that.'

'She is so young,' said the minister, 'her mind goes quicker than yours and mine. Not that she grieves less; but everything goes quicker—the days, and the events, and the beats of the heart.'

'I doubt if you would take as much trouble to understand the beats of my heart,' said Miss Catherine. 'Minister, you're a sensible man in other things——'

Mr. Lothian retreated from her look, and turned to the window. In comparison with himself, Miss Catherine was an old woman; but still, when he was brought to task for it, he had nothing to advance in defence of his love.

'You need not turn away your face,' she said, with a smile, 'as if I had not seen it grow red and grow pale many a time at the lassie's glance. And she's but a bairn when all is said. It's a mystery to me. A woman of your age would think as little of a lad of hers, as of an infant. And yet you, an honest man, that might be her father, let such a lassie fill up your very heart. No! you are a man and I am a woman; you might explain till ye were tired, and I would never understand. A man is a queer being, and, so far as I can see, we must take him as he is till his Maker mends him. And about Isabel, if that lad does not come back——'

'Whether he comes back or not,' said Mr. Lothian, hotly; 'he has disgusted her so much that she will never think of him again.'

Miss Catherine shook her head. 'Make what progress you can while he's away,' she said. 'Keep him away if you can; but don't you trust to her disgust. He is her first love?'

'I suppose so,' said the minister, with a very rueful face.

'Then she'll forgive him all,' said Miss Catherine, with perhaps a thrill of painful knowledge in her voice; there was a vibration in it which made her companion glance round at her with keen momentary curiosity. But her face betrayed no story. 'She'll forgive him all,' she repeated; 'and to undeceive her would take a long time. Perhaps it's only by dint of marrying him that a woman finds out what's wanting in her first love. And you would not like her to go through that process. But if he keep away——'

Mr. Lothian's face had gone through as many alternations of hope and fear as though he had been on trial for his life. 'He loves her,' he said under his breath. 'as well as he knows how.'

'But he loves himself better,' said Miss Catherine; 'and if he has to hang about at home for fear of being disinherited he'll save you some trouble here. And there is no other man about the parish to come in your way——'

'Her thoughts are differently employed,' he said, with a little annoyance. 'What does she know of the men in the parish—or care——'

'That's very true, no doubt,' said Miss Catherine, gravely. 'There was never one like her on the Loch, nor a lad worthy of her, since Wallace Wight. But yet Isabel has eyes like her neighbours. And there is nobody in your way. My word! if I were a comely man like you, little the worse for your years, and not another suitor in the field, she should be Isabel Lothian before the year was out!'

Mr. Lothian coloured like a girl with excitement and gratification. Scarcely on Isabel's own cheeks could there have risen a purer red and white. He was, as Miss Catherine said, 'little the worse for his years.' He was as erect and elastic in his step as if he had been five-and-twenty—his colour as fresh, and his eyes as bright.

'If it depends on me'—he said, with a sparkle in his eye.

'And who else should it depend on?' said Miss Catherine. 'Take your courage by both hands, and, take my word, you'll not fail.'

Thus the house of Lochhead rained influence on this eventful day. Isabel went home with a vague longing in her mind for wider air and a fuller life. But when the minister had left the door, going back with his mind full of tenderness, and just touched by hope, she sat down by the parlour window, and took out Stapylton's letter, and began to read herself into satisfaction with it. The careless words which had struck her like stings at the first reading, she set herself to smooth and soften. 'He meant them to cheer me,' she said to herself; 'to be cheery himself and to cheer me;' and then she would make an effort and swallow the sentences to which no such explanation could be applied. 'It was all his love,' she said again. Words change their character when thus studied. Out of what seemed almost an insult this tender casuistry brought but another proof of the confidence and certainty of love. 'He did not choose his words,' Isabel said at length, with a certain indignation against herself; 'he felt I would understand—how should I miss understanding when I knew his heart?' And then there were other apologetic murmurings, less assured, but not less anxious. 'After all, he is but a man—he does not think like the like of us;' and—'That will be the English way; he always said it was different.' Thus the fanciful girl went on with her letter, until at length she kissed and put it away among her treasures, all anger having gone out of her heart.

Through all the interview between Miss Catherine and the minister, in which so very different an aspect of her affairs was discussed, Isabel sat gazing on the Loch as it faded to evening, with a vague smile about her mouth,

and liquid soft eyes, and dreamed. She saw how it would all happen as well as she saw the boat on the Loch making its way from Ardnamore. Perhaps he might not come for three or even six months. His friends would tell him what time must pass before Margaret's sister could consent. His mother would tell him, for surely even in England mothers could not be so far different. And he would come asking pardon with his lips, claiming more than forgiveness. And Margaret would bless her sister—would plead *up yonder* for a blessing. And the two would stand side by side on the spot where Margaret had died, and plight their troth as it were to her, in her very presence, to love each other for ever and ever. She sat and dreamed while the minister, with unusual light in his eyes, went home to dream on his side of how different an ending. And neither the one nor the other saw aught but boundless happiness, the very climax of life and love, and perfection of human existence in the visionary future that lay beyond.

And then a great quietness came over the Loch. The marriage of Mr. John and Ailie Macfarlane was a nine days' wonder, but that died out by degrees; and even among his relatives or hers, little, after a while, was said of the pair. They had gone out 'into the world,' like Adam and Eve, seeking the unknown region in which their Tongue would be intelligible, and themselves received as the bringers in of a new dispensation. But in the meantime they disappeared from Loch Diarmid, and the lesser prophets they had left behind soon failed to interest the crowd which was used to excitement. Things fell into their former quietness: worldly amusements began again to be heard of.

All was very quiet at the Glebe. Day after day, week after week—nay, month after month, Isabel had sat silent, expecting, looking for the letter which never came, for the familiar step and voice which she had made so sure would come back to her. And neither letter nor visitor had come to break the wistful silence; no one knew the longing looks she cast from her window, as the winter twilight darkened night by night, over the gleaming surface of the Loch. She felt sure he must write, until the time was past for writing; and then a strange confidence that he would come seized upon her. And she had no one to whom she could say a word of her expectations, to whom she could even whisper his name. If Jean perceived her eager watch for the postman, her shivering start and thrill when any footstep was audible by night, or knock came to the door, she mentioned it to no one. Three months and not a word—then six months, the year turning again unawares,

the snow melting from the hills, the snowdrops beginning to peep above the surface of the soil—

It would be impossible to describe all the alternations between fear and hope which moved her as the months went on. Spring came, stretching day by day, more green, more warm, more cheery and sunny on the hills. The poor girl, in her loneliness, sat watching, holding on, as it were, to the darker season which melted away under her grasp, taking comfort in every gloomy day, saying to herself, 'It is winter still!' The birds warbling in all the trees about was a trouble to her. No; not spring again—not so far on as everybody thought; only a little lightening of the cold, or gleam of exceptional weather. She kept this thought steadily before her mind, through March and April, refusing to understand what months they were. But in May she could no longer refuse to perceive. The trees had shaken out all their new leaves from the folds. The hill-side was sweet with wild flowers, the primroses were over. 'Everything is so early this year,' Isabel said to herself with a sick heart.

'No so early either,' said Jean, with profound unconsciousness of her stepdaughter's sentiments; 'no that early. I've seen the lilac-tree in flower a fortnight sooner than now.'

And then the girl could no longer shut her eyes. Winter was over; the charm of early summer was in the air; everything had come again—the lambs, the birds, the flowers, the sunshine, the fresh thrill of life and brightness—everything except Margaret, who was dead; and Stapylton, who was lost; and these two were all in all to Isabel.

CHAPTER XXV

THIS state of things could not go on for ever. Miss Catherine, who had made a hundred vain exertions to draw her young kinswoman to her house, and out of all the melancholy associations of her own, at last became seriously alarmed about Isabel. And the minister, who all the winter through had been indulging himself in such hopes, slowly woke to a perception of the absorbed looks, the languor, the wandering of her eye, and the paleness of her cheeks. She was very soft to him and gentle, accepting his kindness as she had never done before, looking up to him in a way which filled him with a thousand fond dreams. She had done this with unconscious selfishness, because she wanted the support of affection and kindness, not with any thought of him.

She was struggling along her solitary way with so much expenditure of strength and life that it would have seemed hard to Isabel to deny herself that comfort on the road, the anxious devotion that surrounded her like a soft atmosphere. And yet she did not mean to be selfish; but by and by they all found out that her strength and heart were failing her. 'I canna tell what it is,' Jean said, with her apron to her eyes; 'she'll sit for hours on the hill, and syne she'll come home that worn, she hasna a word for one of us; and her eyes ay wandering miles away, as if she were looking for somebody. I canna tell what it is.'

'It cannot be any of their wild notions,' said Miss Catherine, anxiously, 'of Margaret coming back from the grave.'

'Na, na, she has a' her senses,' said Jean; 'she'll look as pleased now and then when she sees the minister coming up the brae.'

Mr. Lothian's cheek flushed, but he shook his head. 'Alas! it is not for me,' he said; and yet a little secret hope that perhaps it pleased her to watch his approach crept into his heart.

'It canna be that English lad she's thinking of,' said Miss Catherine; and Mr. Lothian, struck as with a sudden chill, raised his head and fixed his eyes anxiously on Jean's face.

'She never mentions his name,' said Jean. 'I've reason to think she was awfu' angry at him. The time she fainted she let fall words in her sleep—Na, it canna be that.'

'Provided it is not her health,' said Miss Catherine; and Jean again raised her apron to her eyes.

'I darena say it even to mysel,' she cried. 'I will not say it; but, O Miss Catherine, that's my dread night and day. I try to shut my eyes, but I canna forget that our Margaret was much the same. You ken weel she was a perfect saint, and it was prayer and the Book that filled her mind. But at first, when her illness was coming on, she would sit like that—and look and look! It makes me that sick when I think o't, that I canna sit and look at the other one going the same gait. I canna do it. I think it will break my heart.'

'The same gait!' said the minister, raising a blanched face of woe, 'the same road as—Margaret? No, no—don't say so. It cannot be!'

But both the women shook their heads.

'I canna be mistaken, that hae watched them baith,' said Jean, with her apron to her eyes.

'And we all know it's in the family,' said Miss Catherine, sinking her voice to solemnity.

There came a sudden groan out of the minister's breast. He turned away from them to the other end of the room, with a pang to which he could give no expression. No, no—God could not do it: it was impossible. Margaret—yes—whose visionary soul was fixed on heaven from her cradle; but Isabel, impetuous, faulty, sweet human creature, whose presence made the whole world bright. No, no; after all, God had some regard for the hopes and wishes of His creatures: He would not thwart and trample upon their hearts like this.

'It's in the family,' repeated Miss Catherine. 'Her mother, my kinswoman, Margaret Diarmid, was not five-and-twenty—and her sister younger still; and that branch of the family is extinct, you may say, barring Isabel. But so far as flesh and blood can strive, I'll fight for the lassie's life.'

Mr. Lothian had no power of speech left; but he came to her and took her hands in his, and pressed them with a look of gratitude such as no words could express.

'She shall not be lost if I can help it,' repeated Miss Catherine. 'It may be a kind of brag to say, but there are many things that can be done when you take it in time. Leave her to me, Mr. Lothian, and do not break your heart.'

This conversation took place while Isabel was absent on one of her usual visits to the hill. When the minister had left them, Miss Catherine turned to Jean and began to inquire into the girl's symptoms.

'She has no cough,' she said; 'I have noticed that. But now that man is gone, tell me, Jean Campbell, are ye sure it's not a pining for yon English lad?'

'I canna tell,' said Jean doubtfully, shaking her head. 'Whiles I hae my doubts. She had ay a craving about the post at first. That's past. But if she hears a foot-step sudden in the road, or maybe a neighbour, coming in for a crack, lifting the latch at the outer door, she gives a start that drives me wild; but she never names him. And there were some words she let drop——'

'Don't tell me of words,' said Miss Catherine. 'It was her first love, and there's nothing in this world she'll not forgive him. That's it. And now I see what I must do.'

But nothing was done that day, nor for several weeks after. It was, as so often happens, the very crisis of Isabel's affairs on which they first discussed the question. When she came home that evening she was ill. The spring winds were cold, and she had taken a chill on the wet braes; and for some weeks every symptom which could most afflict her friends made its appearance. It was whispered in the Loch, with much shaking of heads, that the Captain's Isabel was soon to

follow her sister: that she had fallen into 'a decline;' that she had never recovered Margaret's death; and even that the twin sisters had but one life between them according to the common superstition, and that the one could not long outlive the other. These prognostications reached the minister's ears, moving him to a misery of which the people who caused it had not the remotest conception. On the whole the parish, though deeply grieved, enjoyed talking this matter over; and even Jean Campbell, though her heart, as she said, was breaking, had long consultations with Miss Catherine, and with Jenny Spence, and many other anxious visitors, touching the resemblance between Isabel's illness and the beginning of Margaret's. She was rather bent, indeed, on making this out to be the case, although her tears flowed at every suggestion of danger to her remaining charge.

'Her cough has taken no hold of her; she'll shake it off,' said Miss Catherine.

'I mind when Margaret's was no more than that,' Jean would answer, shaking her head. And notwithstanding the profound pain which the thought of any approaching misfortune to Isabel gave them, there was almost a degree of mournful enjoyment in the comparing of notes and exchanges of confidences which took place among the nurses. But the effect was very different upon the minister. The mere thought of danger to her acted upon him like a temptation to blasphemy. In such a case what would remain to him but to curse God and die? Wherever he went, people met him with questions. 'Have you heard how the Captain's Isabel is the day?' 'Eh, I thought she would gang like her sister.' 'Ye see twins, ye never can separate them in life or death.' Such were the comments he was in the daily habit of hearing; and they stung him so that every day was full of torture—pain which, after the bright dreams he had been indulging in, was doubly hard to bear.

But as it turned out the pain was unnecessary. Isabel had caught cold, her body being susceptible at all points, and her mind unhinged—just such a cold as might, had her constitution been weaker, have ended as Margaret's had done. Jean was right in her diagnosis—just as Isabel's illness began Margaret's had begun: there had been, even to some extent, the same cause. The shock which Mr. John's love, and the painful interruption of it had given her, had unstrung Margaret's strength just as Stapylton's absence had done her sister. But there the resemblance stopped. The elder sister's constitution was feeble and Isabel's was strong, and other influences besides that of disappointed love had come in, in

Margaret's case. The shock had struck at all the delicacies of her nature, and made her sick of the life in which such thoughts could be. And her contemplative nature, her visionary heart had taken refuge in heaven; but with Isabel it was not so. Her illness, though it lasted only for a few weeks, looked like an interval of months or years. It put Stapylton at a distance from her. So long as she had lain in her sick room, all expectation of his coming or longing for it had gone out of her heart; and as she recovered the thought came back but dimly to her. She had not forgotten him, but time had gone faster than its wont, and he was further off than she could have supposed—drifted away.

Then Miss Catherine, moved by the urgency of the case as she had scarcely ever before been moved, announced her intention of taking Isabel away for change. As soon as she was able to move, they went to one of the watering-places in which Scotland believes—the Bridge of Allan, and then to Edinburgh. It was not a very long journey, but everything was new to Isabel. It roused her in spite of herself. Youth gained the ascendancy over all the facts which had lessened its brightness. So many new things to see, the bright summer weather, the change and movement—the sight of crowds and novelties, drove things more urgent out of her mind.

And then Mr. Lothian came and paid them frequent visits; so frequent that the parish was moved to its depths, and grumbled at his repeated absence. 'We might a' dee for what he cares,' said the women at the village-doors; and even John Macwhirter, though unused to interfere, gave forth his opinion on the subject: 'I'm no a man to insist on a call from the minister every other day,' he said. 'He's enough ado with his sermons, if he gives his mind to them as he ought; but he's an aulder man than me that have half a dozen weans to think of; and a bonnie example that is to his flock, trailing over half the country after a young lass. Lord, if I was like him I would bide. Ye wouldna see me bring wife and bairns on my head at his time of life; and a young wife's a bonnie handful for an auld man. Ye may gloom, Mr. Galbraith, but you're no far from the same way of way of thinking yoursel.'

'I'm thinking there's many young lasses in Edinburgh and many things of more importance,' said the Dominie. 'Mr. Lothian hasna left the parish for years. And his sermons are running dry, if you'll take my opinion. No doubt the world's a wicked place, but it does the best of men good to see it now and again. I wouldna say, John Macwhirter, but even you yourself might take a hint

from smiths of more advanced views. And as for a divine——'

'You're grand at your jokes,' said the half-offended blacksmith; 'but if I were to take hints, as ye call it, in the same kind of style as the minister, I would like to ken what my Margret would say? She would be neither to haud nor to mind.'

'Now, I was saying,' continued the Dominie, 'a divine has most need of all. He hears what folk are thinking, and a' the new wiles o' the Evil One to fortify your spirits against them. Maybe you think the Auld Enemy is always the same?—which shows how much you know about it. No, no, John. Keep you to your anvil and your iron, and let the minister alone.'

'Na, if it's the deevil he's studying I've no a word to say,' said John; 'a' the world kens there's nae teacher for that like a woman;' and having thus secured the last word and the victory, as far as the applauding laughter of his audience was concerned, John proceeded to constitute himself the champion of the minister when the Dominie withdrew from the field. 'After a' thae prophets and trash, I'm no surprised he should take the play, but he'll be cleverer than I take him for if he gets bonnie Isabel.'

'It would be the best thing she could do, a lass with no friends,' said one of the bystanders.

'But she'll not do it,' said the blacksmith, confidently, wrapping himself all at once in a flaming mist of sparks. Such was the general opinion of the Loch. 'I canna believe she'll have the sense,' Jean Campbell said, to whom it was most important; and after a while the parish almost forgave the minister for his neglect of them in consideration of the interest with which they regarded his suit. Everybody, except Isabel herself, was aware of the conspiracy against her. To herself it appeared strange that Miss Catherine, out of love for her, should leave the Loch and her own home so long, and waste the early summer, which was her favourite season, in the dusty, windy Edinburgh streets. Isabel accepted the sacrifice with the faith of her age in personal attachment, and said to herself that she could never be grateful enough to her old friend. She could not but acknowledge to herself that the change had made of her a new creature. She looked, and thought, and spoke, and felt herself so to do with a touch of soft surprise—like one of the young ladies whom she had sometimes seen at Lochhead. She, too, was a lady born—yet with envy and wonder she had looked at the strangers whose look and air were so different from her own. They were not different now. Insensibly to herself Isabel had acquired another tone and

air. Her soft Scottish speech was still as Scotch as ever, but it was changed. She felt herself to move in a different way, all her sensations were different. Sometimes she thought of the Glebe with a thrill of strange alarm. To go back to Jean and her children, and the solitude without books, without variety—could she do it? Or if that was all in store for her, was it not cruel to have brought her to this different life?

‘Now bring me some of your friends from the College, and let her hear you talk,’ said Miss Catherine, in furtherance of her deep design. The minister, whom she addressed, only shook his head with a doubtful smile.

‘What will she care for our talk?’ he said. ‘The nonsense of a ball-room would please her better. She would take my friends for a parcel of old fogies; and so indeed we are.’

‘And ready to go to the stake for your own notions all the same,’ said Miss Catherine, with much scorn. ‘Are you, or am I, the best judge of what she’ll think? As for ball-rooms, heaven be praised, in her mourning that’s out of the question; and if she set her eyes upon a man under forty, except in the street, it may be your fault, but it shall not be mine.’

‘Will that serve me, I wonder? or is it fair to her?’ said the scrupulous minister.

‘The more I see of men, the more I feel what fools they all are,’ said Miss Catherine; ‘go and do what I tell you, minister, and leave the rest to me.’

And accordingly Miss Catherine Diarmid’s lodging became the scene of a few gatherings, which to a girl more experienced in society than Isabel would have looked sufficiently appalling. But Isabel, with her mind and intelligence just awakened, and with that fresh sense of ignorance which made her intelligence doubly attractive, regarded them as banquets of the gods. Mr. Lothian’s friends were unquestionably old fogies; they had their ancient jests among themselves, at which they laughed tumultuously, and the outer world stared; and they had endless reminiscences, also among themselves, which were far from amusing to the uninitiated. But then by times they would talk as people talked in the old days when conversation was one of the fine arts. And Isabel opened her great brown eyes, and her red lips fell a little apart, like the rose-mouth of a child. She listened with an interest and admiration, and shy longing to take part, and shy drawing back which made it impossible, which altogether rapt her quite out of herself. And her eyes turned with a certain pride to the minister, who would take his full share, and was not afraid to lift his lance against any professor of them all. Isabel raised

her pretty head when he spoke, and followed his words with quiet understanding glances, with rapid comprehension of what he meant, with the ever ready applause of her bright eyes. He could hold his own among them all; he was not afraid to enter into any argument. He contributed his full share to all that was going on; and Isabel looking at him grew proud of him—with the partizanship of his parishioner, and friend, and—favourite.

And all this time Miss Catherine sat, like a benevolent crafty spider at the opening of her net. Nobody divined the deep intention in her choice of her visitors. Not a man under forty, as she had betrayed to Mr. Lothian, ever penetrated within her doors. If the question had been suggested to Isabel, no doubt she would have recognised it as unusual that gentlemen in Edinburgh should be all approaching half a century. But it did not occur to Isabel. She was awed and filled with admiration of the men she saw. It did not come into her heart to ask where were the young men who would have better matched herself and the other girls whose society Miss Catherine cultivated for her sake. Even the chatter of these girls did not enlighten her. They talked of pleasures of which she knew nothing—dancing all night, for instance—but how could it ever be possible for Isabel to dance all night? No, was not this better, loftier, a kind of amusement not inconsistent with all those solemnities of life into which she had had premature admission? Therefore the absence of the youth did not strike her. Miss Catherine was old, and it was natural she should choose her friends to please herself.

CHAPTER XXVI

‘Now,’ said Miss Catherine, when it approached the end of June, and Edinburgh, like other towns, began to empty itself of its prisoners. ‘Now, minister, you may go your ways, and settle down in your parish. I am going to take her home.’

‘Home!’ said Mr. Lothian; ‘to the Glebe?’ and his countenance fell. For, to come and go a dozen times a day to Miss Catherine’s lodgings, and to see her young companion constantly under the shelter of her presence, without awaking Isabel’s susceptibilities or seeming to seek her, was very different from going to visit her in her own cottage, putting her on her guard by the very act.

‘Yes, to the Glebe!’ said Miss Catherine. ‘Don’t look at me as if you thought me an old witch. Maybe I am an **old witch**. No, she is not coming to my house. I

mean to plunge her back into her own—to Jean Campbell and the bairns; and then if you cannot make something of the situation, it will be your fault and not mine.'

Mr. Lothian paused, and mused over this last wile. He smiled a little, and then he shook his head. 'It might be good for me,' he said; 'but it would be cruel to her.'

'Go away with your nonsense!' said Miss Catherine; 'I hope I know the world and what I'm speaking of; but men are fools. I have given her all the change that was good for her here, and she has had just a taste of what life is, a flavour to linger in her thoughts. And now she shall know the cold plunge of the home-coming. Do you think I don't know it will give her pain? But how can I help that? It will show her what she wants, and where she is to get it; and if she does not make up her mind that it is to be found in the Manse parlour, I tell you again it will be your fault and not mine.'

'My bonnie young darling!' said the minister, moved to unusual tenderness; 'but I feel as if we were cheating her, conspiring and taking advantage of her innocence. If it could be done at less cost——'

'Go away and mind your own affairs,' said Miss Catherine, 'leave Isabel to me. Am not I seeking her good? and must I hesitate because my physic has an ill taste? Not I. Go home with your scruples and see what you'll make of it. And you need not take advantage of my work if you have any objections. It's in your own hand.'

Upon which the minister went away, shaking his head more and more. 'You know my scruples will yield but too soon if Isabel is the price held out before me,' he said. And he obeyed his general and went away; but foolishly freighted himself in the very teeth of Miss Catherine's plans, with everything he could think of to lessen the dreariness and change the aspect of the Glebe Cottage. He sent a great box before him when he arrived at Loch Diarmid, which was on Saturday; and on the Monday he hastened up to the cottage, and unpacked the case with his own hands, and took from it pictures and bookshelves, and books to fill them, 'a whole plenishing,' as it appeared to Jean. 'What is this all for?' she said, looking at the arrivals with a sceptical eye.

'It is that Isabel may not think too much of the past when she comes back—that there may be something new to cheer her,' said the minister, somewhat struck by a sudden consciousness that his motives were not much more noble or innocent than those of his ally and fellow-conspirator. Jean stood and looked on while he hung the pictures and put up the shelves, very critically, and with her own thoughts.

'Then Isabel is coming back,' she said, 'and I'm glad of it; among all your grandeur she was like to forget her home. And by all I can see you mean her to stay, or you would not spend good siller and time fitting up all this nonsense to please her e'e.'

'It is to comfort her heart, if that may be,' said the minister; 'that coming back may not be more than she can bear.'

Jean was offended, and tossed her head with an impatience she did not attempt to conceal. 'I'm no one for forgetting them that's dead and gone,' she said, 'nor changing the place they've been in. For my part I would keep a' thing the same. It's like running away from God's hand, to run away from the thought of a bereavement. And I would rather mind upon our Margaret than look at a' your bonnie pictures; and so, if she's no spoilt, would Isabel.'

On the Saturday of Mr. Lothian's return to Loch Diarmid, Miss Catherine intimated her intention to Isabel. 'My dear,' she said, 'the summer is wearing on. I would not say a word about it if I did not see how much better you are. But I think, now that you are able to bear it, we should be thinking of home.'

And in a moment the chill which the minister had foreseen fell upon Isabel. It came upon her like a sudden frost, suddenly quenching the light out of her eyes. She said 'Yes?' not so much in acquiescence as with a sudden wistful question as to when and how this change was to come.

'I was thinking of the end of the week,' said Miss Catherine steadily, 'if that would be agreeable to you.'

'Anything would be agreeable to me,' said Isabel, with a little rush of tears to her eyes—'whatever pleases you. It has been so kind, oh! so kind of you——'

'You are not to speak to me of kindness,' said the old lady. 'It was a pleasure to myself. But now, God be thanked! you're well and strong; and bonnie Loch Diarmid will be in all its beauty. Are you not wearying to get home?'

'Oh, yes. I shall be glad——' faltered Isabel. But it took the colour from her cheek, and silenced all the little cheerful strain of talk which by degrees had developed in her. 'You have stayed away all this time for me,' she said, feeling this a subject on which she could more easily enlarge.

'Yes,' said Miss Catherine, without hesitation; 'I don't pretend to deny it, my dear. It has been for you. And I am very glad I came. You are a different creature. But all the same it will be a great pleasure to get home.'

Isabel said nothing more. Oh, why was not the

minister there to take her part? He would have read the sudden dullness in her eye, the change upon her voice. She sat for the rest of the day quenched out, making attempts to speak now and then, but failing utterly; trying to smile and to talk as Miss Catherine did about the proposed return. Oh! how the girl envied Miss Catherine! The old woman was as lonely as the young one. She had her duties, it was true; but no one to make Loch Diarmid pleasant to her. And yet how pleased she was to go back to all the tedium! Was it only because she was old and Isabel young?

'You'll feel the change, my dear,' said Miss Catherine the day after, as they sat together alone. 'It will be a trial to you going home.'

'Oh, no,' said Isabel, eagerly; and then she made an effort and said, very low, 'It will bring everything to my mind—but, then, it was never out of my mind; it will be as if it had all happened over again—'

'It would have been the same sooner or later,' said Miss Catherine. 'It has to be got over. And now, I hope, you are able to hear it. And when you weary, my dear, you can come to me. I will always be glad to see you—when I have the time.'

'Thank you,' said Isabel, feeling her heart sink in her breast. Glad to see her—when she had time! After having been a mother to her, and her companion for so long, opening up all her various stores of experience and knowledge on Isabel's behalf, feeding her with legend and tale. And now that was over, too—and Jean Campbell and Jean Campbell's bairns were all the companions she should have in the dim future. Oh, for Margaret! Oh, for the love that was gone! Oh, for—Isabel knew not what she would have said. Anything that would have warded off from her the blank that was about to come.

'It will not be cheerful for you, Isabel,' said Miss Catherine; 'but you have a stout heart, and you must not forget it is your duty. This has been very pleasant for the time. It is cheery to see new people and new places. But home is ay home.'

'Yes,' assented Isabel, feeling in her heart that she was the most abandoned of sinners not to be able to feel any rapture at the thought.

'And there is no saying when we may have another such holiday,' said Miss Catherine, cheerfully. Isabel could make no reply. The full force of the change rushed upon her. The sounds in the street seemed to grow melodious as she thought how short a time she would have it in her power to listen to them. And it seemed to her that her friend was quite unaware of the

tumult which this intimation had raised in her breast. Had Isabel known how cunningly Miss Catherine had contrived it, how she had been working up to this climax, and kept the 'cold plunge' as her most effectual weapon, the girl's mind would have risen up in arms against such cruelty. Miss Catherine left her seated, melancholy, over some work, with every line in her face turned downwards, and the new life gone out of her, and retired to her own room that she might be able to chuckle unrestrained over her success. 'She'll marry him, if he ask her, in six weeks,' Miss Catherine said to herself.

Left to herself, Isabel cried—not altogether because she was going home—because she was so wicked as not to be glad at going home—because her badness of heart was such that she regretted her holiday life with all its indulgences. When she returned to the Glebe, should she be able, she asked herself, to resist the movements of her own feelings, to think as little of Stapylton as he did of her, to keep from longing and looking and listening till the suspense brought on another fever? What should she do to occupy herself? to keep off such a humbling absorption in one thought? There was but one bright spot in all the monotonous landscape: the minister would stand by her, whatever happened to her. Night or day she could trust to his sympathy. He would come to her when she called him, stand by her, be her support, her counsellor, her guide. She thought not of him, but of herself, with youth's spontaneous, unintentional selfishness. It did not occur to her to think of him. But so far already Miss Catherine's spells had wrought.

They arrived at Loch Diarmid at the end of the ensuing week; and were met, not only by Mr. Lothian and by the carriage and servants from Lochhead, but also by Jean Campbell, eager to see her charge, and rapturous over the change in her appearance. From the moment in which they left the steamer. Miss Catherine began to carry out her remorseless policy. She kissed Isabel as soon as she had stepped ashore, and took leave of her.

'You'll come and see me, my dear, whenever you have time,' she said; 'but you've a good long walk to the Glebe, and I will not hinder you now.' And Isabel, standing still by her stepmother's side, waiting till Jean had arranged to have someone sent after them with the boxes, watched her friend drive away with an undescribable sinking at her heart. Miss Catherine compelled the minister to enter the carriage with her. She pulled him by the sleeve, and whispered in his ear, and resorted to violent measures to bring him, as she called it, to himself. 'Go with her now, and you show her her own power, and

you'll spoil all,' she said; and the bewildered man yielded. The carriage flashed away, while Isabel stood, not able to believe her eyes, on the little pier. The summer evening light was sweet upon the Loch, glancing down aslant on the braes, which were golden with the setting sun; and the labourers were going home, and all the soft sounds of repose and domestic reunion were in the air. Jean was busy with the man on the pier about the luggage. Since Isabel had left that same spot nearly three months before, nobody of Jean's appearance or manners had come near her, except as an attendant; and it would be difficult to explain the sudden sense of desertion, the cruel solitude, and mortification and falling back upon herself, with which the girl looked after her friend.

Her friend! Had it been love for her at all which had moved Miss Catherine, or only pity, and a disagreeable duty, from which she was glad to be relieved. Was there anyone in the world who cared for Isabel—for herself? They had been sorry when she was ill; they had pitied her. Even the minister—he was gone too, with Miss Catherine, leaving her in the first moment of her return all by herself. Tears flooded to Isabel's eyes, and these were driven back by pride, and rushed to her heart again, filling it with a silent bitterness beyond all expression. It was a kind of public affront to her, leaving her there on the pier to make her way home as she could. Even Jean opened her eyes when she returned to the spot where her stepdaughter stood forlorn.

'They might have taken you with them as far as Lochhead,' said Jean. 'Is that the way your grand friends part with you? And the minister, too! I canna understand it. They might have taken you with them as far as Lochhead.'

'I would rather walk,' said Isabel, though she had a struggle to enunciate the words; and then the two took the familiar road and went on together, as if it were all a dream.

There was a little consolation in the changed aspect of the little parlour, the engravings on the walls, the little bookshelves, the volumes the minister had chosen. It would not be *his* fault that he had so left her. And for the first time a sense of pleasure and pride in the watchful, anxious tenderness of her elderly lover came into Isabel's mind. At that particular moment she was so forlorn that these marks of his thought for her came sweet to her heart. It could not be his fault. As soon as she had taken off her bonnet, she who had come up the road with such languor, feeling a weariness altogether out of proportion with the fatigue she had

undergone, came eager to look at her new treasures. He had consulted her about them all, though she had not known why. She it was who had unwittingly chosen the half-dozen prints which so changed the aspect of the grey walls. He had remembered exactly what she liked, what she had said, shy as her opinions on such subjects always were. Her countenance smoothed out under this influence. Jean, who had been rather contemptuous of the 'nonsense,' followed her about while she examined everything with anxious eyes. 'She's real weel in her health; but oh, I'm feared she's changed,' had been Jean's first thought as Isabel's abstracted looks and indifferent answers to all her news chilled her warm delight in her stepdaughter's return. 'After a' your grandeur, you'll no think much of your ain little house,' she had even said, with a perceptible taunt as they entered it. And Isabel's first step, which had been to sit down on Margaret's sofa, and cry her heart out, had, natural as it was, been a blow to Jean. She had herself become callous to the associations of the place; and she had taken so much trouble to set out the tea there, and brighten it for the home-coming. But when Isabel perceived the change about her, and began to brighten. Jean brightened too.

'Eh! if I had but thought you would have cared,' she said. 'There's the history o' the Prodigal up in the garret, a' painted and grand, no like thae black-and-white things. But I never thought ye would care. Oh, aye, it was just the minister! and a foolish thing it was for a man of his years, climbing up on chairs and hammering away like a working man. But so long as you're pleased——'

'Did he do everything himself?' said Isabel.

'Oh, 'deed did he—everything; and would have jumpit into the Loch at the end, if that would have pleased ye. The man's just infatuate. I think shame to see it—at his time of life.'

'He is not so old,' said Isabel.

'Ye've gotten to your English the time you've been away,' said Jean; 'and nae doubt it's as it should be, for you that's a lady born—but it doesna sound so kindly as the auld way. And you're bonnier than ever;' she added, walking round her stepdaughter with admiring eyes; 'and it's a pleasure to see a gown that fits like that; and you've gotten a new way of doing your hair: you're like some of the Miss Campbells that visited Lochhead, or that English young lady that was living down the Loch. But eh, my bonnie woman, ye're no like the Captain's Isabel.'

'I don't know that there is any difference,' said Isabel,

touched in spite of herself by the tears that rose in her stepmother's eyes.

'Nor me,' said Jean, putting up her apron. 'I canna tell what it is, but I see it. Eh, Isabel, I'm an auld fool. I've been thinking we might be real happy, now you kent me better. But I see the Glebe's nae place for you now. You'll no bide long here.'

'Where should I go to?' said Isabel, with a little bitterness; 'no, you need not be afraid. I am wanted nowhere but in my own house.'

'You couldna be any place where you would be mair thought of,' said Jean wistfully, 'but you're no to be angry at Miss Catherine either. It was want of thought, maybe, or that she took it into her head that you and me—after being so long parted—would like best to be alone.'

'Angry! why should I be angry?' said Isabel. 'It is not that. I did not think of Miss Catherine. She has been very kind, and I hope I am grateful——'

'You're her ain kith and kin. I dinna see the call for gratitude,' said Jean, with a little heat. 'And she might have brought ye hame in the carriage, and nae harm done. I never understand your fine folk. But sit down, my lamb, and I'll pour you out your tea, and ye maun try to mind we would a' lay down our lives for you, and that you're in your ain house, and can do as you please.'

Perhaps there was a forlorn satisfaction in that, after all. But when Isabel crept to bed, a few hours later, without any visit from the minister, without any communication from Lochhead, her heart was far from light. She wept in the dark when she laid herself down in her own little bed. It had been a dream, that was all; and now she had come back, and was no longer of consequence to anyone—a Miss Diarmid, companion of Miss Catherine, and favourite of society no longer; but only the Captain's Isabel, too lowly for the lairds, too high for the peasants. Visions came across her mind of the scenes she had lately taken a part in, of the smiles that had been bestowed upon her, of the interest with which her simple words had been listened to; and now no smiles, no flattering tribute of admiring looks, were to be hers. Miss Catherine had put her back decisively into her own place; and the minister—even the minister! Yes, he was very good to her; he had given her books and pictures to amuse her, as if she had been a solitary child. It was the last little mark, no doubt, of the interest in her which she had attributed to another feeling. But why should Mr. Lothian care for her? Why should Miss Catherine care for her? They had been very kind to her, which is quite a different matter. They had cured

her of her illness, and done a great deal to improve her; and now they had put her back softly, but firmly, at once into her own place. No doubt it was best, Isabel thought, turning her face to the wall, that she should know at once how it was to be; but yet it was a strange downfall—and very hard to bear.

She did not go to church on the following Sunday, pleading her fatigue; and with an unexpressed hope that Miss Catherine would have sent to take her along with herself; but Miss Catherine took no notice. She made the proper inquiries of Jean, and was sorry to hear Isabel was tired; but that was all. Mortification, anger, and disappointed affection surged up all together in poor Isabel's mind. One of those forlorn days, with her veil over her face, she made her way, by the most unfrequented paths she could think of, to her sister's grave. It was in a corner of the churchyard, out of the way of passers-by; and Isabel threw herself down by it and clasped her arms round the white stone in all the abandonment of her immediate pain, though that pain was not primarily called forth by the loss of Margaret. After she had wept out all her tears, she still retained her position, her soft arms wound about the stone, clinging to it as she might have clung to her sister, her head leaning against it, her dilated, tear-worn eyes gazing sadly into the air at their full strain, though she saw nothing.

She was watched, though she did not know that anyone was near. Mr. Lothian had yielded against his will to Miss Catherine's peremptory counsels, but he had kept upon the watch wherever Isabel went, finding out her movements by that strange mesmerism of sympathy which conveys our secrets through the air. He had seen her to the grave, though she had not seen him. And when her tears were over, and she sank down into this melancholy embrace of all that was left to her, the man's heart could bear it no longer. She whom he could scarcely refrain from taking to his protecting arms when she felt but little need of him, how could he stand by and see her clinging to the cold gravestone as to her only refuge? Isabel was too much absorbed, too hopeless of any external consolation, to hear the rustle through the grass as he came to her. He had fallen upon his knees by her side before she roused herself to turn those wistful, strained eyes to him. And then all considerations of what he might or might not do had been driven out of his mind. He put his arms tenderly round her, not even thinking of love, thinking of nothing but her need. 'My bonnie darling!' he said with a sob, 'my precious Isabel! It's the living you must come to, and not the dead, my dear! my dear!'

'I have nothing but Margaret in the world,' said the girl, with sudden, sharp anguish, the fountain of her tears once more opened by this unexpected tenderness. She thought as little of love or lovemaking as he did in the sudden flooding of his heart. Nor was Isabel conscious how he drew her away from the chill stone to his own breast, and held her, letting fall actual tears over her as he had not done twice in his life before.

'No, no; not there!' he said, unconscious of his own words, holding her close to him, clasping her fast, and thinking, as men so seldom think, not of himself, but of her. It did not even occur to him how sweet it was to appropriate her thus to himself. It was her want, her absolute need of him, her self-abandonment which he could not bear. 'Here, my darling,' the man murmured, with a pathetic abnegation of his own feelings, 'lean here;' and so held her upon his bosom, schooling himself to be—if need were—her father instead of her lover—anything to comfort her in the moment of her weakness. When Isabel came to herself, he was gazing upon her, as she leant on his shoulder, as if from an unapproachable distance. She was in his arms, and yet his eyes rested on her with wistful reverence, as though she had been miles away.

'I did not mean to be so weak and so foolish,' she said, gathering herself away from him with a vivid blush. 'I thought I was—alone—I thought——'

'You thought you had nothing in the world but her that is gone,' said the minister. 'Isabel! and yet you know who is the light of my eyes, and the desire of my heart?'

She leant her hand again upon the stone, her tears dried, her heart beating, and visibly a crisis before her, which must affect her whole life.

'I am old enough to be your father,' he said, with his voice trembling. 'I never forget that. I've seen you grow up bonnie and bright, and loved you more year after year. And now I feel as if I were taking an advantage of my bonnie darling. Isabel, if your life were bright and full of love it would be different. But you are alone. And never man on earth could love you dearer than I do. Will you let me take care of you, my darling?' he cried, and took her hands and gazed into her face. 'Will you come to my house and make it glad? I'll be young for my Isabel!' said the minister, with tears in his eyes. And the virgin heart within him came to his face and chased away the years as if by magic. He was kneeling, though he was not aware of it; and his eyes and every line in his countenance were pleading more eloquently than words. But Isabel, in whose heart two rival forces

were struggling, was too much agitated and blinded by her own feelings to see.

'Oh, Mr. Lothian, let me go home!' she cried, stumbling to her feet. 'How can I think of this—how can I answer you here?'

'You shall answer me where you please,' he cried, rising with her, and supporting her with his arms. 'When you please and where you please, my darling! But it is here of all places that I want you to know—Isabel, you *know*?—that there is one that loves you above life, above happiness—more than words can say.'

She turned to him for one moment, and gave a sudden, tearful look at his agitated face. 'I know, I know!' she cried. 'Oh, let me go home, now!'

And he drew her hand within his arm, and took her home, saying not another word. All was said that could be said. It was for her to decide now.

CHAPTER XXVII

YET the minister said one more word as he left his love at her own door. He had been debating the question with himself as they crossed the braes, whether he should leave it to her to answer him when she pleased and where she pleased, as he at first said. He took her to her own door without a word more upon this subject of which his heart was full; but ere he left her, he paused a moment, holding her hand in his. 'Isabel,' he said, but without looking at her, 'if I come to-morrow will you give me my answer?'

Isabel made no reply. She gave him an anxious, timid look, and withdrew her hand, yet lingered upon the threshold as if there still might be something to say.

'I will come to-morrow for my answer,' he repeated in a more decided tone. And then the cottage-door closed on her, and he went away.

'Eh, is the minister no coming in?' said Jean Campbell. 'Pity me, Isabel, what have ye done to him—him that was for ever in this house, and now he never enters the door?'

'I have done nothing to him,' said Isabel. 'What should I do to him? I have nothing in my power.'

'Oh, lassie, speak the truth!' said Jean. 'You ken weel, and a' the Loch kens, that you have mair power over him than kith and kin—aye, or the very Presbytery itself. But you're that perverse, ye'll listen to nobody; and I doubt but ye've been unkind to him, or gibed at him, puir man! and he has nae fault that I ken of but his years.'

'I don't think he is very old,' said Isabel, half under her breath; and she went away into the little parlour which he had decorated for her, and sat down by the window, all alone, without even taking off her bonnet. Never before in her life had she been conscious of having anything so important to think about. Thinking had nothing to do with the matter when Stapylton was concerned. It was nothing but a struggle then between her love and grief—between the lover's eager wishes on one hand, and all the tender decorums of life, all the claims of the past, on the other. She had struggled, but she had not required to think. But now there had come such an occasion for thought as she had never before known. The question was not one of inclination or any such urgent motive for or against as should have settled it for her, without loss of time; on the contrary, it was of the very nature of those questions which demand the clearest thought. Love, as she had apprehended it once, had floated altogether away, she told herself, out of her life. Of that there was to be no more question, either then or for ever; but yet life would not end because it had been thus divested of its highest beauty. And Isabel knew she was young, and felt that she had a long existence before her. Was she to do nothing for the comfort of that existence—nothing to win it out of the mists and dreams? She sat down breathless, her heart heaving with the agitation through which she had lately passed, her nature all astir and moved by a hundred questionings. She did not love Mr. Lothian. Love was over for her—gone out of her life like a tale that is told; but life had to continue all the same: and what kind of life?

Then she did what, in the circumstances, was a strange thing to do. She went to her room, and took out of the locked drawer, the only one she possessed, Stapylton's letter, which had lain there for months. But she could not read it there, nor even in the parlour where there were so many signs of the one love and none of the other. She went out, for she was still in her walking dress, carrying the letter in her hand. No, she could not seat herself under the birch-tree on the hill and read it there—the spell of its associations would have *been too* strong; the very air, the bees among the heather, the rustling of the branches, would have spoken to her of him who had met her so often on that spot. Isabel hesitated for a moment in doubt, and then she crossed the road and ascended the hill opposite the cottage. The place she sought had already grown to be a sacred spot to all the countryside. The burn still ran trickling by, though the sweet thoughts that once accompanied it were still; the rowan hung out its odorous blossoms over the grassy seat.

It was Margaret's little oratory to which her sister went to think over her fate.

And there she read Stapylton's letter over again. Her own mind had advanced, her manners had changed since she read it last. She had grown used to the delicate, ever thoughtful tenderness of a man who not only loved her, but was full of old-world, chivalrous respect for her womanhood and her youth. Her eyes flashed, her whole heart revolted now, as she read this letter. When she had come to the end she cast it from her like a reptile, and clasped her hands over her face with a sudden thrill of shame that blazed over her like fire. She was ashamed of having inspired, of having received, of having ever reconciled herself to such an address. What could he have thought of her to write to her so?—how could he have dared? Isabel did not know how much her own estimation of herself, and the world, had changed since she read it first. It wrung from her a moaning cry of injury and self-disgust. To think that she should have borne it—that she should have spent her tenderest thoughts on a man who was so confident of his power over her, so insulting in his security! The letter lay white on the grass, and the breeze caught it, turned it contemptuously over, and tossed it to the edge of the burn, where it lay dabbling in the soft little current. It was the first thing that caught Isabel's eye as she uncovered her face. No, she could not let it float away on the burn to tell the passers-by how little respect her first love had felt for her. She caught it up fiercely and thrust it back into the envelope, as if the paper itself had harmed her.

Then she went silently home, holding Stapylton's letter in her hand. She did not put it even in her pocket as a thing belonging to her; but held it, wetted by the burn, listlessly in her hand. Yet she put it back once more into the locked drawer. It was one of her possessions still, no more to be parted with than any other legacy of her past life. It was still afternoon, and the broad bright summer sunshine lay over the Loch. Isabel sat down at her parlour window, listless and alone. She was tired with her walk, and had 'no object,' as her stepmother said, in going out again. She could not now wander about the braes as she had once done. There was a heap of work lying on the table, domestic mending and making, chiefly for herself; but she could not sit down to that silent occupation at a moment when all the wheels of life were standing still, with an expectant jar and thrill, to await the least movement of her finger. She took a book at first; but her own thoughts and her own situation were more interesting than any book. Then she gazed out, without well knowing what she saw—but by

degrees, her perceptions quickening, became aware that Miss Catherine's boat, with its bright cushions, was gliding out from the beach opposite Lochhead. It was a boat which could be identified at once from all the coarser forms on the Loch. There were ladies in it—young ladies, as Isabel felt. The boat stood out shining on the silvery sunshiny water, with its shadow as vivid below as was the substance above. That was how life went for the others—a life within Isabel's reach, so near that she could touch it with her finger. It seemed to her that she could hear their voices and laughter while she sat alone. They were going up Tam-na-hara, the highest hill on Loch Diarmid, to judge by the direction they were taking—a merry party, with the sunshine flooding all round them and their joyful way.

When the boat disappeared, Isabel took up some of the work that lay on her table. Had it even been work for the children there might have been some sort of consolation in it; but it was for herself. She seemed to be shut up in a little round all circling in herself—the grey walls her only surroundings—this homely household her only sphere. At six Jean came to the door and called her to tea. The children were seated at their porridge, Margaret's chair had been carefully put out of the way, and Isabel sat down on her stepmother's other side, to the curious composite meal. She was not disposed to listen, but Jean was as little disposed to be silent.

'Mary's been complaining of her head,' she said; 'I think I'll no send her to the school the morn; maybe you would give her a bit lesson, Isabel, out of one of your books, as you used to do. There's measles about the Loch. I dinna like to expose her at the school.'

'Very well—if she likes,' said Isabel.

'Na, we'll no ask her what *she* likes. Jamie's been keepit in again the day. If I was Mr. Galbraith, I'd find some means of making a callant work better than ay keeping him in. Losh, I would think shame to be mastered by a wean! And you, ye muckle haverel, why should I be at a' the trouble, and Isabel at a' the expense, keeping ye at the school when ye learn nothing? Laddie, ye've nae ambition. If Mary had been the lad and you the lass——'

'I wouldna be a lassie to be the Queen,' said Jamie in indignation.

'I can do a' his lessons better than he can,' cried little Mary; 'I never was keepit in in my life. I'm ay dux, and he's booby——!'

'Whisht! whisht! and no quarrel,' said Jean. 'There's company at Lochhead, Isabel. Nae doubt that's the reason Miss Catherine has never been here. But she

might have sent for ye when there were young folk about. I'm no meaning a word against you, my bonnie woman; but you were ay a hasty bit thing, and strangers dinna ken the warm heart that's wi' it. It's vexed me, the minister no coming in. You've been taking affronts, Isabel, at them; or some of your pridefu' ways; they were a' a great deal mair here in the auld time——'

'It was for another, and not for me,' said Isabel, with sudden humiliation.

'I'm no saying that,' said Jean; 'but onyway there's a change. I have my ain pride, though I'm but a cotter's daughter myself—and you've mair right to it, that are a lady born—but if you'll no take it amiss, Isabel, a young lass like you shouldna show it to the like of them. They're no used to it. And though you've good blood in your veins, you're no just the same as Miss Catherine; and it canna be a small thing that's turned the minister that he wouldna come in.'

'There might be other reasons for that,' said Isabel under her breath.

'What are ye saying? The man has worshipped the very ground ye trod on since you were little older than Mary,' said Jean seriously; 'I'm no saying I understand it for my part. He's aulder than me—and figure me fashing my head about a young lad! But if he wearies at the last it can only have been your blame.'

'I think it would be best not to speak of such things,' said Isabel, with some heat, 'before the bairns.'

'Maybe you're right there,' Jean muttered, after a moment's pause. And then she resumed, 'Mary, you'll get your seam if there's nae lessons to be learned to-night—unless Isabel gives you some of her poetry—and, Jamie, get you your books. If you're diligent, maybe Isabel will gie ye a hand. Poor thing!' she said to herself, as she turned away to put her room in order after the meal, 'it's the best thing I can do for her—better than sitting hand idle and no a creature to speak to her. If she were a lass that could go to service, or even that could stir about the house. But her that was never brought up to do anything, and a lady born!'

The next morning, when Isabel was putting her books in order, and wiping the dust from the shelves he had put up for her, and pleading his cause to herself, Miss Catherine suddenly appeared at the Glebe. A more unexpected visitor could scarcely have been, and for the moment Isabel was disposed to be stately and affronted. Miss Catherine paused, almost before she spoke, to look round and observe the change in the room. She shook her head as she kissed Isabel. 'Poor man!' she said; 'poor man! that's what his wisdom suggested to him. To

make your own house pleasant and cheery when he should have thought of nothing but tempting you to his.' This was a sufficient indication of her mission. She sat down steadily with the air of establishing herself for serious work, and pointed Isabel to a seat near her. 'My dear, sit down; I have a great deal to say to you,' she said; and the girl's impatient temper fired at once.

'Whatever you have to say, Miss Catherine, it can surely be said while I am doing my work,' she said, turning to her books. But she was held by the glittering eye which her old friend, half-contemptuous of her petulance, fixed upon her, and after a vain attempt to continue her occupation, turned round and dropped into the indicated place. 'You have not said anything yet,' said Isabel, but with a feeling that already she was having the worst.

'I might speak to my housemaid while she was dusting,' said Miss Catherine, 'but not to you, Isabel Diarmid. I have come to ask you but one question, my dear. Are you going to be a reasonable creature, and make yourself and an honest man happy? or do you mean to deliver yourself over to weariness and this do-nothing life?'

'I have plenty to do,' said Isabel, startled, but without sufficient presence of mind to answer anything but the first natural scrap of self-defence on which she could lay her hand.

'It is not true, Isabel: you have nothing to do worthy a young woman of good connections by the mother's side, as you are. And when you have better in your power, and a life that is worth your while, and a man that is fond of you, do you mean to tell me you will throw them all away?'

'Miss Catherine,' said Isabel, almost crying, 'you have been very kind; but I don't know why you should question me like this. At home I am not so good as you; you don't care to come to see me or take notice of me. Why should you take any interest in me now?'

'Well, you may say it is him I take an interest in,' said Miss Catherine, dryly. 'If you are affronted, Isabel, as you appear to be, I am come to tell you what will happen if you send him away again as you did before, and take no courage to look into your own heart. Are you happy without him? If it comes to be that he will never pass this road again, never enter this room, nor take more interest in you, will that be a pleasant ending in your eyes?'

Isabel made no answer; she only turned her head away, with flushed cheeks and averted looks.

'For, don't deceive yourself,' said Miss Catherine,

‘that would be the result. He may have been weak, but he has always been able to hope; but if you say “No” now, there will be no middle course for him. If he puts himself in your way again, I, for one, will wash my hands of him; and I will never do anything to throw him in your way. Do you understand what I mean?’

‘Yes, I understand,’ cried the girl; ‘but if you think—if you think—I am to be threatened——! Miss Catherine, you have been very kind; but you are not my mother, or my near friend, to meddle with me now.’

‘But I *will* meddle,’ said Miss Catherine, ‘and for your good. Will you part with him and me, and all that is best near you, for a dream—a delusion—a fancy of your bit foolish heart? Or will you accept a happy life and a good man, and all that heart can desire, when Providence offers them to you, Isabel?—that is what I have come to ask. And I’ll not go till I get my answer. I was fond of your mother, and fond of Margaret, and I am fond of you,’ said the old lady, with softening eyes. ‘My dear, I would give a good year of my life to see you so safe landed. They are gone that would have advised you better than me; but I cannot stand by and let you throw your life away. It would be a happy, good life. You would be like the apple of his eye. He loves you like the men in books—like the men in your poetry you’re so fond of, him and you. If I were as young as you, and my life in my own hands again—— But when I was your age I was a fool; will you be like all the rest of us, and choose your own dream, and let your life go by?’

‘Were the rest like that?’ said Isabel, suddenly rousing up, with white lips and troubled eyes, to gaze at her monitor, who had thus changed her tone all at once.

‘I could tell you stories of that,’ said Miss Catherine, suddenly taking the girl’s hand into her own, ‘and some day I may. But there is no time for that now. Isabel, will you think well, and ponder what I say?’

‘I am dizzy with thinking,’ said Isabel, putting her hand to her head with a certain despair.

‘Then think no more,’ said Miss Catherine, ‘but take what God sends you. He must not find me here; he would never forgive me. Isabel, me, that was your mother’s friend, I bid you make that man happy, and not sin against your own life. He’ll come before I can get away. God bless you, bairn,’ said Miss Catherine, hurriedly kissing her, ‘and don’t forget what I say.’

CHAPTER XXVIII

MISS CATHERINE'S words had scarcely died out of Isabel's ear when the minister himself stood at the door.

She was standing where her kinswoman had left her—standing in front of the window, where the light fell full upon her face and figure, her hands held softly together, her eyes full of uncertainty and anxious thought. When Mr. Lothian came in she raised them to him with a dumb entreaty, which went to his heart. He had come to have an answer to his love-suit; and she who had to decide it stood gazing at him, praying him meekly to tell her what to do and what to say!

He came forward at that appeal, and took her hands into his.

'Isabel,' he said, with a voice full of emotion, 'must I leave it over till another time, and come back when you have made up your mind? My darling, you are not to make yourself unhappy for me.'

'Oh, no, no,' she said, half-sobbing; 'I cannot tell what to do. Tell me what to do. It is you that know best.'

And once more she raised her eyes to her lover—humble, beseeching, asking his counsel. Surely never man was in so strange a dilemma before. He made a little pause to master himself; he made an effort to throw off from him his natural interest in his own suit. He looked at her, into her beseeching eyes, to see her heart through them, if that might be. His voice sunk to the lowest passionate tones.

'Isabel,' he said, clasping her hand so closely that he hurt her. 'do you love *him* still?'

Then there came a cry as of a dumb creature, and big tears rolled up into her eyes.

'No!' she said, gazing at him with those two liquid globes—dark, unfathomable seas, in which all his skill and wisdom failed. It seemed to him as if she had, by some craft of nature, veiled the eyes which he might have divined, with the unshed tears which he could not divine.

'You only can tell,' he cried, losing such semblance as he had of calm—'you only can tell! Isabel, do you love him still?'

'No!' she repeated, with more energy; 'no, oh, no—never again!' and let the tears drop, and looked at him softly, with her eyes unclouded.

'Then come to me!' he said, almost with violence, letting her hands fall and holding out his arms to her.

She paused; a flood of colour rushed over her face, that had been so pale. Her eyes fell before his. She held out to him the two hands he had loosed his hold of, and put them into his. It was not such love as he had dreamed. His heart, that was so young and full of fire, ached with the pang of the almost disappointment, though it was better to him than any other satisfaction. She gave herself to him sweetly, gently, with a soft, virginal calm.

'Yes,' she said under her breath, 'if you will take me—this way—if you are content—'

'My dear, my dear, more than content!' he cried, his heart beating with love and joy, and disappointment, and mortification, and happiness. She was so gently acquiescent, so calm, so—resigned—yes, that was the word; while he was full of all a young man's fervour and passion. And yet, at last, she was his, and it was sweet. When he left her he did his best to school himself in the tumult of his emotions. Was it not always so? Could one mortal creature ever fully satisfy another at that supreme moment and junction of two lives? Was there not ever too little or too much—a failure from the perfect dream, the unspeakable union? But she was his all the same—to be cherished, cared for, made happy—she who was so unfriended. About that side of the matter there would be no doubt; and she would consent to his happiness, acquiesce in it, smile with soft wonder at his passion. Well, after all, was not that a woman's natural part?

Isabel, for her part, was very giddy when it was all over, and felt like a creature in a dream. When she stood up the light seemed to swim away from her eyes, and a blackness came over the world. Something sang and buzzed in her ears; strange colours seemed to creep over the Loch and prismatic reflections. But yet amid all the bewilderment and confusion was a sense of comfort that it was settled at last. She had no more need to question with herself—no effort to make after a decision; a sense of quiet stole into her soul, the storm was over, and she had reached the haven.

That was an exciting day at the Glebe. Miss Catherine returned in the afternoon in the carriage, which was a rare grandeur, and kissed Isabel, and blessed her. She had gained her purpose, and it was no longer needful to shut the girl out from her house and her life. As the first symptom of the great change over, she carried Isabel off in the carriage to join the visitors at Lochhead; and it was Miss Catherine who intimated the great news to Jean, who had been much startled and mystified by the commotion in the house, though without any very clear idea what it meant. It was an intimation not without its importance to Jean, and took away her breath: but

she received it with a stoical concealment of her own individual feelings, with a few tears, and a shower of good wishes. 'And me that was finding fault with Isabel because the minister wouldna come in!' she said, with an unsteady laugh.

Meanwhile Isabel, with her head swimming, had gone back to the other sphere for which she had sighed, and found herself the object of a thousand little regards and observations. Miss Catherine, after her neglect, did not seem able to do enough to show her affection; and ere long the minister, now no longer her friend and adviser, but her lover and affianced husband, joined the party. The sight of him had the most curious effect on Isabel; she was immediately covered, as by a shield, from Miss Catherine's too demonstrative satisfaction, from the overwhelming comments of the others; but for herself her head swam more than ever, and the solid earth seemed to have grown unsteady under her feet. She was in a dream; not such a sweet dream as he was walking about in, his head in the clouds; and not painful either, as one doomed and going to the sacrifice. It was only confusion—a mist which she could not penetrate—something which blurred all the outlines and confounded one object with another. She kept apart, and kept silent, feeling that if she spoke she would be incoherent, and if she moved might totter. It was all so new. When she had time to use herself to 'what had happened,' things would be different; such, at least, was what she said to herself.

But things were very little different until the wedding took place, which was a few days after the completion of the year of mourning for her sister. During the interval she scarcely ever regained her balance. She was as composed as usual, and took everything with outward calm; but she did not know what she was doing. The notes of her being were jangled out of tune—not harshly, but vaguely. The effect upon her was not to distort, but to dim everything. The world became vague, and all that was in it. It did not seem to her that she was to begin only a new chapter of existence, but that a new book, mysterious and strange, lay before her, beyond the crisis which she slowly approached. And at last the day came; a September day, early in the month, when the heather had just died out of bloom, and the crack of the sportsman's gun was heard on the hills. There was no church-going procession, no pretty stream of bridal maidens from the Glebe to the church. The marriage took place in the little grey parlour, with the decorations in it which the bridegroom had put up, and with the associations that were so sacred to both. They stood where Margaret's sofa had stood, where she had died,

and were made man and wife. And when it was done and had become irrevocable the bride woke up with a little cry—the mist vanished from her eyes and she saw things clear—a cloud of interested, smiling faces around her, a man by her side who was her husband—the new life, no longer a matter of the future, but present, had begun.

‘Did you speak, my darling?’ said her new husband, drawing her arm through his, and looking at her with the ineffable satisfaction in his eyes of a man who had attained all his desires, and reached the summit of content.

Isabel gazed up at him, attracted and touched in spite of herself by that wonderful look of happiness, scarcely able to refrain from being glad for him, notwithstanding the sharp and new impression of reality which weighed so strangely on herself. ‘I never thought it would come true,’ she sighed, turning her head away with momentary petulance, and burst into uncontrollable tears.

The bystanders were too much interested in the bride to notice if any cloud passed over the minister’s face. Had there been so, it would have been foolish; for was it not to be expected that a bride the moment she was married should signalise that wonderful event by the most natural sign of emotion? It was but what everyone looked for, an almost duty of her position. The women took her from her husband and kissed and blessed and cried over her in their turn. ‘And nae mother to support her at sic a time,’ the humbler wedding-guests said to each other as they stood about the door. There were two lines of sympathetic gazers all round the post-chaise when it came to take the bridal pair away; fashion was not urgent on that point on Loch Diarmid—but Mr. Lothian, with all the poetry of youth still in him, was eager to carry his love away and have her all to himself. She was very pale and trembled excessively as she was led out of her father’s house; but at last she had fully awakened out of all her dreamings, and felt the force of the change she had made. And Isabel did not turn from, but to, her husband in that dangerous crisis of her being. Whatever might happen, she was conscious that he was her support and comforter. She put her hand into his trustfully, and went away—not happy as he was, yet at peace. Into the long summer stretch of life, the existence without passion, without suffering, that lay before her now all was over; taking farewell—was it for ever?—of the cottage in which she had been born.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE wedding tour was but a short one; and when the snow appeared on the hills in October, and the early winter began to isolate Loch Diarmid from the rest of the world, Isabel stood by the Manse window, as she had pictured herself standing, and looked for her husband coming home. She had dreamed of it all; and somehow, out of a dream it had come to a reality, and she found herself in the very position she had imagined, still somewhat wistful, but no longer sad, or distracted by any of the doubts of the past. It would be impossible to say how good he was to her, as good as a good man of the most generous and delicate instincts could be to a young creature whom he loved with all his heart, and with a certain touch of compunction and compassion, and a ghost of remorse mingling in his love. He was not, he knew, the kind of man she should have married; he was old enough to be her father; and the consciousness gave to his love a soft delicacy, and reverence, and tenderness, which are rare in the world. Had she been unreasonable he would have made himself a very slave to her caprices; but Isabel was not unreasonable. She was even yet a little timid of expressing her own wishes or opinions.

The aristocracy of Lochshire was not remarkable for any great intellectual qualities any more than other rural aristocracies; neither was it the highest possible school of manners and social grace. But yet it was a great advance to Isabel of the Glebe Cottage, who had no training in the ways of the world. She was a lady born, as Jean Campbell, with pride, had so often asserted; and the gentle blood, or the gentle mind, or both, asserted themselves. Imperceptibly the change crept over Isabel. Mr. Lothian was 'well connected' in his own person, and he was well off, having had something to begin upon, and so many years of frugal bachelor life to provide him with means for the gratification of his young wife. And Miss Catherine, proud of her *protégée* and of the match she had made, superintended Isabel's toilette, and watched over her comings and goings. So that the winter passed away in a pleasant flutter of social occupation, and the new Mrs. Lothian had such share of *succès* as is agreeable to a young wife setting out upon the world.

But yet, on the whole, what she preferred was the long winter nights when she watched for her husband coming home by the waning twilight, and sat down with him at the table to which her own hands had added what

decoration was possible. If her eyes did not light up at his approach, they yet smiled softly on him with that serenity which was so new to hasty Isabel. She was glad when he liked his dinner, and listened with a sweet impartial satisfaction while he praised the dishes she had ordered for him, and sometimes helped to prepare, and her own blooming looks. She 'took his kiss sedately,' not more moved by it than she was by the whisper into her ear that the tea was ready, of the pretty housemaid, whom she had known all her life. And then the Dominic would stray in and deposit his gaunt length in one of the easy chairs by the drawing-room fire, and the two men would talk of all they knew, and all they had seen, and all they thought, while she sat working between them, saying now and then her half-dozen words, listening with all the fresh curiosity of her age. Her husband would pause now and then to explain to her some special subject of discourse, and Isabel would listen, smiling, looking up from her work. At first she had said, 'Never mind, I like best to find it out from what you say; I like to hear what Mr. Galbraith thinks, and what you think, and put them together.' But Mr. Lothian was not satisfied with that. If he had a weakness, it was to instruct his wife, and make her understand everything he was interested in. And he was a little vexed that he could not persuade her, as he said, 'to take a part.' But that was a slight—a very slight vexation. And Isabel did not care to take a part. She listened, and she pursued her own thoughts; and sometimes but half heard the talk, thinking of how to plant a new flower-bed as spring was coming, or whether little Mary would not be better for a new frock; or how to arrange the ladies and the gentlemen at the great dinner-party which she was shortly to give in return for the civilities of the Loch. Then she would glance at her husband, who was looking at her with his eyes so full of love. His hair was getting white, it was true; but then his cheek was still like a rose, and was set off by the white hair. And Isabel's eyes dwelt admiringly on the ruffles which she had hemmed, which she had crimped, and in which she had placed the little pin she had given him when they were married. It was not a very valuable ornament. It was a small oblong brooch, set round with pearls, which she had herself worn with Margaret's hair in it, as long as she could remember. Now it held a little curl of her own intertwined with Margaret's, and had been placed on a pin to fit it for its present use. It was the only ornament of the kind the minister ever wore. And it was Isabel herself who had to put it into the delicate cambric every morning.

He was so particular about his frills. And she was proud of them, and let no hand touch them but her own.

And when spring came a great idea had developed in Mr. Lothian's mind. He had been thinking of it all the time, though he had said nothing. It was to take his wife to London, to see everything that could be seen, to go to the theatre, and the opera, and make acquaintance with the big world. It took away Isabel's breath when the suggestion was made to her. Going to London to her was something like what going to Constantinople would be to a young woman in her position now—only so much more dazzling and splendid to think of. When Jean Campbell heard of it, it brought tears of pride to her eyes. 'Eh, Isabel, my bonnie woman, ye have a life like a fairy-tale!' she cried, and such was the effect produced upon the Loch in general by the news of this wonderful project.

'His young wife has turned his head,' said John Macwhirter. 'There's nae fool like an auld fool, especially when there's a wife in the case.'

'If it had been in to the Assembly in May, ane could understand,' said old Sandy Diarmid, 'to see the Lord Commissioner and a' the sights; but London's a different story. It would suit him better to save his siller for the family, when they come.'

'But I hear there's nae word of a family,' said another gossip, 'and he has been saving since ever he came to the parish. So long as the pulpit's well supplied I see nae harm in't for my part.'

At the village doors the question was still more hotly discussed.

'Set her up with her trips to London!' cried one of the neighbours, 'and her only Duncan Diarmid's daughter, as we a' ken, and with nae right to such extravagance.'

'But by the mother's side Isabel's a lady born,' cried Jenny Spence, 'and her father was an officer as grand as young Kilcranion, that you think so much of. When ye marry an auld man ye may well expect mair consideration at the least. A' he can do is but little for bonnie Isabel.'

'If they were to spend the siller on God's service it would set them better—and him a minister,' said Mary White.

And in higher circles there were a good many smiles and gentle jokes about the minister's uxorious fondness. Even Miss Catherine was not quite sure about such an extravagant notion. But all the criticism did not affect Mr. Lothian. He had made all his plans, and arranged everything without regard to the popular babble. 'I

mean my Isabel to see everything, and have everything I can give her,' he said. He had lived in that mysterious world himself when he was young. He had been tutor to the Marquis, the tutelary deity of the district, who came to church always when he was on the Loch, and had the minister to dine with him and showed him every sort of attention. London was no such wonder and enigma to him as it was to most of his parishioners. And Isabel, for the first time since her marriage, was moved with an excitement which almost renewed her impetuosity. The thought of going 'to England' stirred up all her dormant faculties for pleasure. She made him tell her all about it, where they should go; what the Park was like where the ladies rode; if he was sure it was quite right to go to a theatre—and a hundred other particulars; and when at last the moment came for setting out, the young creature almost threw off her wifely gravity and felt herself a girl again.

They went by sea, which was a somewhat awful experience; but yet, when she had recovered the first frightful consequences of acquaintance with the unsteady waters, even the fact of 'the voyage' added something to Isabel's sense of growing experience and knowledge of life. She walked about the deck, leaning on her husband's arm as the steamer went up the peaceable Thames, quite recovered from all unpleasant sensations, and full of bright wonder and curiosity. 'You know everything as if you had lived here all your life,' she said, in unfeigned admiration for her husband's cleverness, and hung upon him, asking a thousand questions, pleased with all the novelty about her, proud of his unbounded information, a sweeter picture he thought than all London besides could produce.

'I was here when I was young like you,' he said, 'when everything takes hold of one's mind—when I did not know I was to be so happy as to bring my bonnie Isabel. I suppose it was before you were born.'

'And perhaps you were thinking of some other Isabel,' she said, looking up in his face, with the laughing half-jealousy of the wife, a something more like love and less like simple affection (he thought) than he had seen in her before.

'Never,' he said, bending down over the sweet face that was his own, 'my darling, I never loved woman till I saw you. And when I saw you, you were no woman, but a child. I kept my heart young for you, Isabel.'

She gave him a wondering glance, and then a little flush came over her face, and she turned to ask him a question about something else which struck her on the other side of the river. She had not kept her heart fresh

for him. She felt, with a momentary sense of guiltiness, that they were not equal on that point. But her very thoughts were as innocently and simply true to him now as if he had been—her father. Something like this was what Isabel thought, but not with any conscious sense that her love for her husband should have been different.

She was quite happy standing there with her hand drawn closely within his arm, proud of him and of everything about him, from his boundless knowledge down to his spotless ruffles; and felt at the present moment no need of anything else for the happiness of her life.

And Isabel enjoyed all the sights of London with the same proud satisfaction. He could tell her about everything, from Westminster and St. Paul's down to the old gentlemen riding in the Row, among whom he pointed out to her the Duke and Sir Robert Peel, and at least a dozen more, as if he had known them all his life, she said to herself. He was not so learned in respect to the ladies, it was true. But still to know so much was a great thing. And then it made his wife so independent. She had no need to ask, to consult books, to remain in ignorance of anything. It gave her the sweetest sense of superiority when she met a young country lady in the Row with her husband who was not so clever as the minister, and saw them gaze and gape at the notabilities. 'Mr. Lothian will tell you who they are,' said Isabel, proudly. And when her countrywoman confided to her how little she knew about the places she had seen, the gratification of the minister's wife grew stronger and stronger. 'Mr. Lothian was here when he was young,' she said; 'and I never need to ask anybody but him—he knows everything.'

'Here when he was young, indeed!' young Mrs. Diarmid, of Ardgartan, exclaimed to her husband, when they parted company. 'Here as a tutor, I suppose; but Isabel gives herself as many airs as if he were the Marquis himself.'

'Well, at least he was the Marquis's tutor,' said young Ardgartan; 'and if she is pleased with her old man, it is very lucky for her.'

And the fact was that Isabel was thoroughly pleased with her old man, and enjoyed her expedition with all her heart. The Marquis asked his old tutor to dinner, and gave Isabel his arm, and placed her by his side with much admiration of her sweet looks. 'I used to know your father,' he told her, 'when I was a lad. What an eye he had! and would tire us all out shooting over the Kilcranion moors.' This acknowledgment of Captain Duncan as himself in some way received by the local deities, was balm to Isabel's soul, and opened her shy

intelligence to the Marquis, who found her little sayings as piquant as sayings usually are which fall from pretty lips. And the Marchioness offered Mrs. Lothian her box at the Opera to Isabel's great confusion and perplexity. The young ladies of the house clustered round her, telling her what the music was to be, and how she would enjoy it, and how much they envied her her first opera. 'You will think you are in Heaven,' cried one enthusiastic girl. When she left the grand house in Park Lane, with this ecstatic prospect before her, Isabel felt that her life, as the stepmother had said, was indeed like a fairy-tale. 'But is it so nice as they say?' she asked her husband, as they went home.

'To them it is,' said that man of universal information, 'for they have been brought up to it. I am not so sure about you; but you must ask me no more questions, for I want you to judge of it for yourself.'

And it was with a sense of responsibility that Isabel set out for this new felicity. She had put on one of her wedding-dresses, the blue one which her husband loved—and had white flowers in her pretty brown hair. Her sense of her present judicial position took from her the pretty girlish excitement into which she had fallen about all the novelties that surrounded her, and restored that soft dignity of the old man's wife, the look of age she had tried to put on when she first realised Mrs. Lothian's responsibility. She looked, perhaps, rather more girlish in this state of importance and seriousness than she did in her livelier mood. And there was another reason, too, for unusual dignity. Lady Mary was to go with her under her charge. 'And I trust to you, Mrs. Lothian, to take care of her,' the Marchioness had said, with a sense of the joke which was far from being shared by Isabel. It was the first time she had ever acted as chaperone, and her mind was disturbed by the awful question what she should do if anyone approached the young lady who was under her charge. 'Is she not to speak to anyone?—and am I to keep everybody away?' she asked her husband, and if possible admired Mr. Lothian's knowledge more than ever when he instructed her in her easy duties. As for Lady Mary herself, she was quite excited by the prospect of witnessing Isabel's delight. 'Oh I wish I were you!' she cried, 'I am *blasée*, you know. I know them all off by heart, and exactly how they will look, and how Grisi will bring out her notes. But you will think you are in Heaven.' And then they all got into the lordly carriage, with the powdered footmen, and went to this earthly paradise, with no thought of any evil awaiting them, or harm which could enter there.

There were many opera-glasses directed to the box when Isabel in her simplicity and pretty dignity, half-matron half-child, took her seat in it. Lady Mary was no beauty, and the eyes of the world directed themselves to the fresh, new face with a rustle of curiosity and interrogation. Isabel gave one glance round her in acknowledgment of the fine assembly, and the ladies in their pretty dresses, and then turned her face intent upon the stage. The opera was *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Her companions both watched her with much more interest than they did the scene—Lady Mary with delightful expectation at first, then with a shade of disappointment and surprise: while the minister, looked on amused, and yet conscious of the least little shade of anxiety, lest his wife should compromise herself by a total want of susceptibility to the entertainment. Neither of them observed, at first, among the gazers below and around one pair of opera-glasses, which the owner with a sudden start had directed full upon the box at the commencement of the performance, and which remained fixed, held with rigid hands, during the whole of the first act. When the curtain fell, Isabel drew breath and heart, her eyes somewhat strained and dilated with the intense gaze she had been fixing upon the stage.

‘Don’t you feel, then, as if *this* was all a dream, and *that* was true?’ said Lady Mary, who was a musical enthusiast.

‘I don’t know,’ said Isabel. ‘I don’t understand; if I could see what they all mean.’ She glanced round her and down at the stalls as she spoke, and there she caught a glimpse of—what was it?—a face, a part of a face staring up at her, almost hidden by the black circles of the glasses, but yet with something in its aspect that seemed familiar to her. ‘Do they always stare like that?’ she said, drawing back with the sense of having received a shock, though she could not tell how.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Lady Mary, hastily. ‘No one minds—don’t think of that. But tell me, don’t you feel it—doesn’t it go to your heart?’

‘I think, if there was anything in my heart, I would say it, and not sing it,’ said Isabel. ‘I think they are all mad. Is she Lucy Ashton? But Lucy would not have the heart to sing. Oh, how could she sing when she could scarcely speak?’

‘Oh, don’t you see,’ said Lady Mary, ‘that is just what music is? When you cannot speak, you can burst out in music. You can go to the piano, and say everything that is in your heart—you can sing—’

‘Yes,’ said Isabel, softly; ‘Auld Robin Gray, or that Irish song the poor girl sang when her heart was

breaking; but all that music, full of shakes, and trills, and great bursts like the organ made on purpose—oh, no; not if her heart was breaking!’

‘But, my dear,’ said the minister, ‘how can you tell? an Italian heart may break in music?’

‘Perhaps an Italian heart, but not Lucy Ashton’s,’ said Isabel, a wave of sudden colour passing over her face. How strange it was, out of this crown of her happy, peaceful existence to look back on the time when she had first read about Lucy Ashton, and understood. She was an uninstructed rustic, and had never heard any music in her life before. This historian says not a word in support of her way of thinking; but such was her ignorant opinion, out of the depths of her reticent Scotch heart, in which there lay so deep a sense of every emotion. It was her ignorance, no doubt, which suggested it. Anyone who had read the ‘Bride of Lammermoor’ to her, with the very least power of characteristic representation, could have played on her as on a delicate instrument; but she did not know how to understand the other form of the poem. It bewildered her. She was not in Heaven, but in the most curious artificial sphere. And then, what was that thing—those two black motionless glasses, fixed upon her from below? Whose was the turn of the head that seemed to appear to her behind them—the aspect of the half-seen figure lost among the crowd? She could not tell; but it all awoke the strangest thrill of uneasiness in her heart.

‘I should like to go home,’ she whispered to her husband. ‘Who is that always staring? And the music makes me dizzy. I should like to go home.’

‘Staring, my darling! There are so many people staring,’ said Mr. Lothian; ‘and I am not surprised,’ he added, looking down upon her with fond admiration. The speech and the movement brought him forward to the front of the box. He took no notice of anything else, having his whole attention fixed upon his wife; but she saw a sudden movement below, and the direction of the opera-glasses change a little, as if the gaze was turned on her husband. The sensation to her was as if some dangerous being in a mask were watching them. And everything was so unreal—those people on the stage going through what was supposed to be the business of life in music, and the spectators periodically rousing themselves to a little paroxysm of frenzy, according to Isabel’s opinion. She had never seen anything so unreal and so strange; and it might be some enemy who was watching them for anything she knew—

But she sat out the performance bravely, trying to conceal her first impressions, now and then carried

away by a splendid outburst of melody, but still keeping close to her text that Lucy Ashton could not have had the heart. 'How could she have remembered to sing like that, if her heart was breaking?' said Isabel; and there was a painful pang in her own which she could not explain. She seemed to see those glasses before her even on the way out, gazing at her from behind a pillar. They were before her eyes all the way home, and withdrew her attention even from Lady Mary's lamentations over her want of musical taste. 'But I see it is because you are not used to it,' Lady Mary said at last. 'Half a dozen more evenings would make you think so differently. Oh, Mr. Lothian, stay a little longer, and let us educate your wife!'

'It would take a longer time than we can spare,' said the minister, only half pleased with the suggestion; and Isabel gave a little shudder in her corner. She was thinking of that opera-glass, and of the high crest of hair rising behind it, and the air of the half-seen figure. Could it be——? Whom could it be? It was the only unsuccessful attempt at pleasure she had made since they went to town.

CHAPTER XXX

THE Loch was in full beauty when the minister and his wife returned home. It was a clear, lovely summer night, with stretches of daffodil sky over the blue hills towards the west, and a pale young moon glimpsing at herself in the water. The flowers were all bright in the Manse garden, the villagers nodding pleasant recognition, the Loch all cheerful with boats skimming like seabirds over the water. 'This is worth London twenty times over,' Mr. Lothian said. 'Are you glad or sorry, Isabel, to come home?'

'Glad,' she said, standing by his side, looking out well pleased on the scene she knew so well. 'But I am glad we went, too. Seeing things makes people experienced; it is like growing old. But you should not laugh at everything I say.'

'It is not at you, my dear,' said the minister; 'but do not get old on my account, my darling. I like my bonnie Isabel to be young.'

'I should like to be thirty,' she said, with a soft laugh; 'then I would be nearer you.'

'You could be no nearer me,' he said, drawing her close to him, 'my bonnie darling! Remember always that I could not be happier, Isabel. I have the desire of my heart.'

Why this little scene should have taken so solemn a tone, neither could tell. One moment they had laughed, and the very next moment he was making this little confession of supreme happiness as if for her comfort when he should be away from her. But he was not going away from her; neither was there any possibility of estrangement in their future. There was no passion in Isabel's mind to make her exacting or difficult. She held up her soft cheek to him, and he kissed her as if she had been his daughter.

'If we were behaving as the people do in your favourite opera,' said the minister, 'we would sing a duet of felicity. My dear, you've got a pretty, sweet little voice. I think you must learn to sing.'

'Oh, don't speak of that opera,' said Isabel; 'I hated it. The men singing about everything—even their dinner! And Lucy Ashton——'

'My dear, it was not Lucy Ashton; it was Lucia di Lammermoor.'

'I know; but it was meant to be all one,' said Isabel. 'Lucy sing like yon! Oh, they cannot tell what it is to be in despair.'

'My darling, and how should you know?' said the minister, looking at her with his admiring smile.

'I don't think I know; but I can divine,' said Isabel; and her eyes seemed to deepen so, that her husband gazing into them could not make out their meaning. But he saw a little shudder, quite slight and momentary, pass over her. And his first thought was that she must be ill.

'Come in,' he said; 'it is growing cold. How is it we have twice become so serious this pleasant night, after coming home?'

'It is that opera; I never like to think of it,' said Isabel, and shivered again, and went in, her husband following. It was very childish of her; and yet somehow she felt just as she had felt at the opera, as if someone were watching them—looking at their tranquil life with unkindly eyes.

Next day, Mr. Lothian stayed at home, going no further than the village to see the wives and ask after the men; and in the evening came Mr. Galbraith to resume with delight his long-interrupted 'cracks.' Instead of the fire they sat at the open window, Isabel gliding out and in cutting flowers, and looking after her garden. 'There is some comfort in this—now we have got our pleasant nights back again,' said the Dominie. 'You saw many fine things in London, but I'll be bound you saw nothing so bonnie as the Loch, and that young moon.'

'No,' said Isabel; 'nothing but streets, and churches, and ladies riding. Yet I am glad to have gone; now I will never feel ignorant when you speak. It was as good as jumping ten years.'

'All her thought is to make herself thirty,' said the minister, with a laugh of happiness; 'but I tell her, Galbraith, I like her best as she is. Sometimes I think I am too happy,' he went on as she flitted out into the garden; 'I have everything I can desire.'

'I never knew the feeling myself,' said the Dominie; 'but they say it is of kin to melancholy. No more to wish for. I cannot say I wish for much myself; but that's no out of satisfaction, but out of despair.'

'Despair is a hard word,' said the minister.

'Oh, aye; far too hard a word. I've not vigour enough left to nourish a passion. It's more a sense of the impossibility of any change, and a kind of content; and, minister, I'm free to acknowledge it—I thought you were but an old fool, setting your heart on a young thing; but I see now you were a wise man.'

'A happy one at least,' said Mr. Lothian; 'but it would be harder now to leave this life than ever it was before.'

'Well, well, there's little likelihood,' said the Dominie, with some impatience; 'let us be thankful—you are as likely to live till a hundred as any man I know.'

But just then Isabel came hastily up and brushed past them almost running, as if in fear.

'I thought I saw a man in the garden,' she said, shedding, for the first time for ever so long, a few hasty tears.

'My darling,' cried the minister, starting up, 'where?'

'Oh, down among the trees,' she said, 'down there—outside the garden wall. I saw the branches stir—and I thought—'

'But, my dear, any man that likes may be on the other side of the wall,' said her husband: 'why should that frighten you?'

And then Isabel dried her tears. 'It was very foolish,' she said, 'I know it might be anybody; but it gave me a fright—as if he were going to jump over the wall and come in to us here.'

'And if he had?' said the minister, smiling—till Isabel smiled too, seeing the absurdity of her alarm. But she watched anxiously when Mr. Lothian and the Dominie made the round of the garden. Of course, there was no man to be seen, and they went in and closed the windows, and talked very comfortably for an hour before they separated, with no more interest or solemnity. Mr. Lothian had to attend a meeting of Presbytery next day. This pleasant evening was the end of his holiday: and such a holiday as it had been—a poem in his life.

Next morning he rode away from the Manse door, looking, his wife thought, a very picture of what a man of 'his years' ought to be. She had smoothed down the cambric ruffles in which she took so much interest with her own hand, and put the gold pin carefully into the clean, well-starched, daintily-crimped folds. There was not a spot upon him, nor upon the glossy hide of the horse, which was a recent acquisition, and, in the opinion of the neighbourhood, 'too spirity a beast' for the minister. 'I shall be back as soon as I can,' he said, as he turned from the door; 'but I may be obliged to stop and dine somewhere, so don't be alarmed, my dear, if I am late.' And he took off his hat to his darling, and rode away saluting her as if she had been the Queen. All this adoration and tender respect had their effect upon Isabel, though she was not conscious of it. She went in and put away some of the things from the breakfast-table, the little silver tea-caddy, the pretty crystal dishes for the butter and jam, things too dainty to be touched by the hands of the servants, and put the room into more delicate order, moving about in her summer morning-dress, like a bit of light in the solid mahogany-furnished dining-room. And then she went and gave her orders for the dinner, which for that day was to be something which would not spoil by waiting, and which could be eaten cold on the morrow, if Mr. Lothian was not back in time. 'The minister may stop to dine with the Presbytery,' his wife said; and lingered a little in the clean, bright kitchen, hearing some scraps of news from Kirstin, and arranging about various things that had to be done. 'If Janet gets her work finished soon, we might put up the curtains in the spare room, not to lose the day,' said the mistress of the Manse, 'as the minister is away.' It was a day of leisure, with no special point in it, a day for odd little pieces of business, and the sweet silent leisure which breaks so pleasantly into the routine of a settled life.

It was about dusk in the long summer evening, when, listening for her husband's return, and growing a little weary of her solitude, Isabel heard someone ride past the Manse gate, and a few minutes after the Dominic came in to tell her that Mr. Lothian had just passed—that he had been sent for by someone who was sick up towards Kilcranion, but did not expect to be long. 'He dined at Maryburgh,' the Dominic said, 'and here's some parcels he threw to me as he passed. If you'll put on your hat, Mrs. Lothian, it's a bonnie night—we might take a stroll among the heather, and meet him as he comes home?'

He had called her Mrs. Lothian scrupulously ever since

her marriage. Isabel went out with him, well pleased, into the soft night, which was musical with the rustle of the trees, and the splash of the water on the shore, and the voices from the village.

'But I think it will rain,' she said, looking up to the sky.

'And that's true,' said the Dominie, turning sharp round, as a sudden blast, for which he was unprepared, came in his face. Clouds had been gathering overhead during all the evening, but now it came down all at once, with an evident intention of continuing for the rest of the night. They stood for a moment uncertain, hearing, as Isabel long remembered, the sound of the horse's hoofs carrying her husband over the hill in the stillness of the night.

'And nobody could run after him now with a plaid or a cloak,' she said, throwing her gown over her head, as was the fashion of the country, to shield her from the rain.

'He would be a clever runner that would make up to them,' said Mr. Galbraith; 'but after sixteen years at Loch Diarmid, a drop or two, more or less, will do him no harm.'

And then they went back into the dining-room where the lamp was lighted. The lamp did not give a very brilliant light when there was no fire to help it, and the room had a dusky look, as rooms will have of summer evenings after all the light and gladness of the day.

'I think I will light the fire,' said Isabel. 'He'll be cold, and he likes to see it. Here,' she added, with a little pride in her London experience, 'it is never too warm for a fire.'

'All the better,' said the Dominie, stretching his hands over the cheerful, crackling blaze, when Isabel had lifted away the ornaments on the hearth, and set light to the fire, which, in conformity with the necessities of the climate, was laid ready below. 'A fire is a kind of Christian creature, and keeps a lonely man company; but, if I were you, Mrs. Lothian, considering the long day he's had, and a wetting at the end of it, I would have ben the kettle too.'

'And so I will,' said Isabel, who was nowise shocked by the suggestion. The kettle was brought accordingly, and placed on the hob, where the old man contemplated it with much satisfaction; and she opened her press, and brought out the silver liqueur-stand which had been Mr. Galbraith's present to her on her marriage, and the silver sugar-basin, and the toddy ladles, and all that was necessary. She was so pleased with her pretty silver things, that it was a pleasure to her to have to take them

out, and see them reflecting the light on the table; and the fire began to brighten up all the dark corners of the room, and to glance upon her pretty hair, which reflected it, and her ornaments, which made little gleams about her as she went and came.

'And a lucky man he is to have such a homecoming,' the Dominie said, half to himself, with a growl which he intended for a sigh. And Isabel smiled without taking any further notice, seeing herself pass in the glass on the mantelpiece with all the reflections about her, and all the ruddy light dancing about the room; better than a bachelor-den with two men over the fire; there could not be much doubt about that. And she made all her preparations, and had her tea-tray brought in and placed at one end of the table, and bent her ear through all her activity to hear her husband come home.

While the entire household was thus engaged, both servants and mistress preparing for the master's arrival, it was the Dominie who first noticed that the little fire they had made for him was beginning to burn out, and the kettle to puff away all its contents in steam. He made a little joke over it, and had both renewed, but began to feel uneasy in his heart. The night had grown very dark all at once, and the rain would drive right in the horse's face as it came down the brae. 'And such a spirity beast!' Mr. Galbraith glanced out from the window when Isabel was not looking, and saw that the Loch had got up in a white foam, and that the sky was growing blacker and blacker. Just then the sound of the horse's hoofs was heard again. It approached, dashing furiously down the hill, and echoed past the house towards the stable which was at the back.

'There he is at last!' said Isabel cheerfully, not noting in the easiness of her mind the precipitate gallop, or that there was anything out of the ordinary in her husband dismounting at the stable-door.

'It will be for the wet,' the Dominie said, feeling a sudden pang of alarm. 'I'll go and see, with your permission——'

It seemed to Isabel that he was never coming back, and that her husband took the most unreasonable time to make his appearance. 'He'll be telling David about the horse,' she said to herself. 'He is so particular to make the poor beast comfortable.' Then she poked up the fire to make it blaze, and drew his easy chair to its side. 'He'll be taking off his wet things,' she went on half-aloud, accounting to herself for his delay; 'He'll be warming himself at the kitchen fire—but why not here? He'll have gone upstairs to change.' At last she ran out to the door, losing patience. The Dominie met her

coming back. She could not imagine what was the matter with him. If he could have been drinking—and if there had been time for him to intoxicate himself—that might have explained the glazed look in his eye, and the imbecile smile about his lips.

‘It was not him at all,’ said the Dominie, with a jaunty air, which made her wonder again—‘Could he have taken a dram in the kitchen?’ ‘It was all a mistake. It was someone riding post-haste to Maryburgh—somebody from—Kilcranion, I suppose. You do not think the minister would come down upon us at a breakneck gallop like that?’

‘But it went to the stable-door,’ said Isabel, astonished, but not yet roused to alarm.

‘No, no, nothing of the kind. Sounds are deceiving in the night. It’s a man and horse away to Maryburgh. Ye can hear them echoing down the road now,’ he said, throwing the windows suddenly open. A gust of wind and rain suddenly came in, and he closed it again hurriedly, with a nervous haste, which made the identification of any sound impossible. ‘There’s a storm brewing,’ he said, ‘but we’ll draw to the fire, and be all the cosier within.’

And with a curious gallantry, which took Isabel entirely by surprise, he placed a chair by the fire for her, and made her sit down. Then he resumed his own, and held his hands, which she could see were trembling, over the blaze. ‘I think I’ll go and look if I can see him,’ he said, after a moment. ‘Don’t you stir, Mrs. Lothian. It’s no a night for you to put your bonnie head out of doors. Promise me you’ll no stir!’

Isabel could make no answer in her amaze. And he went away, closing the door carefully after him, and left her, beginning to hear her heart beat, and wondering what it could mean. No doubt, had her love been of a more passionate description, it would have taken fright before now. But it was so difficult to realise that anything could happen to the husband-father—the man who had encountered all the risks of country life unharmed as long as she could remember. She asked herself, what could be the matter with the Dominie?—and then she wondered what ailed the Diarmids of Glencorrie, where Mr. Lothian had gone, that they should have sent for him so late. And then she listened intently in the silence, till her heart fluttered up in her ears, and she could hear nothing else. She sat, it seemed to her for a long time, over the fire, waiting and wondering, and then she heard the kitchen-door open and shut, and a sound as of voices. By this time alarm had begun to take possession of her—not terror so much

as uneasiness, wonder—a sense that in this night, which was so dark, and through which the wind began to howl, something—anything might happen. This only—but it worked sharply upon Isabel. She sprang up and ran to the door, and out into the hall. There she caught a glimpse for one moment of her maids, and the Dominie, and the gardener, all clustered about a drenched figure, with a face as pale as death, which she recognised to be her stepmother, Jean Campbell. When they heard her, they fell apart, with looks of fright, and Mr. Galbraith advanced towards her. He was pale too, white to the very lips, and pointed to her to go back into the room she had left.

‘My dear,’ he said, taking her hand, leading her in, with gentle force, ‘don’t go there just now. Keep up your courage. He has met with an accident.’

‘An accident!’ said Isabel, rousing at once, ‘oh, Mr. Galbraith, let David get out the old gig—that would help him home.’

‘They’re bringing him home, my dear,’ he said, looking at her wistfully. ‘You must keep up your courage; they are coming.’

‘Let me run and see that his room is ready,’ said Isabel, trying to break from him; ‘he will be wet, and there should be a fire. I like to see to everything myself. Oh, Mr. Galbraith, let me go and see that his room is right!’

‘The women are looking to that,’ he said, with a suppressed groan; ‘my dear, I fear it’s a bad accident. You must summon your courage.’

‘Is he not able to walk?’ said Isabel, her face blanching suddenly as there came to her through the pauses of the wind sounds as of the tramp of men approaching. This time the Dominie groaned aloud. He took both her hands and placed her trembling in the chair she had placed by the fireside for *him*.

‘Stay still here,’ he said; ‘you must not go out to—agitate him. I will bring you your stepmother—she will tell you all about it.’ And he rushed away from her once more, closing the door. Oh, what was it? Isabel’s brow began to throb, and her heart jumped wildly against her breast. A bad accident! It would be the new horse that was so ‘spirity.’ Oh, why was she shut in and not to go to him? She could not bear it; she was the fit person to receive him, whatever had happened. And who but herself could see that the room was all right and everything in order? A second time she rose and ran to the door, but once more was met as she opened it, not this time by the Dominie, but by Jean Campbell, who came in, all wet and shivering, with such

a distraught look in her face as Isabel had never seen there before.

'O my bonnie lamb!' cried Jean, throwing her arms round and detaining her. 'No yet, you mustna go yet. O my bonnie woman! You that I thought so safe and free of all trouble! But it canna be, Isabel—it canna be—stay here with me.'

'I will go,' said Isabel, struggling with her. 'I will see what is wrong. If he has hurt himself, he wants me all the more.'

'He's feeling nae hurt,' cried Jean, holding her step-daughter fast; her pale face working and her eyes straining. 'He's in nae pain—O my bonnie Isabel!'

'What do you mean?' said Isabel, with inward horror, under her breath.

'O my lamb!' Jean answered, clasping her in her arms. The young wife broke out of the embrace with her old petulant impatience. She threw the door wide open, rushing upon the knowledge of her fate. At the very moment when she did so, the men had entered the hall moving slowly with their burden. She stood uttering not a word, like a creature made out of stone. It was not that she was stupified. She recognised the men individually one by one, and through her mind there passed the curious speculation how they could all have been found together at such a time. And they carried—what? Something all covered over with a great grey plaid, stretched out upon a broad plank of the wood which had been lying by the roadside fresh from the sawmill—something which neither moved, nor groaned, nor betrayed the least uneasiness at the unsteady progress of its bearers. She gave a cry, as much of wonder as of misery. What was it? And then Mr. Galbraith tottered to her, staggering like a drunken man, with tears rolling down his grey ashy cheeks. 'O my child!' cried the old man, taking her into his arms. She looked him piteously in the face; she could not understand his tears, strange though the sight of them was. She would believe nothing but words. 'What is it?' she cried, 'what does it mean?'

By degrees it was got into her mind—she never knew how; they did not tell her he was dead, though they believed so: but that the doctor had been sent for, and would tell what was to be done. Isabel did not faint—such an escape from the consciousness of evil was not possible to her. She retained all her faculties in an acuteness beyond all previous knowledge.

'I should be there,' she said, struggling with them, to do what is wanted. Let me go—nobody shall nurse him but me.' But she was stopped again by the doctor,

who had arrived at once, and who put her back, exchanging a look of pity with the Dominie.

'You must stay here, Mrs. Lothian,' he said; 'I must see him alone, and I'll come and tell you.' When he was gone, Isabel walked about the room with the fierce impatience of suspense. 'You'll no tell what it is,' she said, wringing her hands. 'Oh, tell me what it is. Is it his head or a leg broken, or what is it? Is it only me that must not know?'

And then Jean came to her and took her in her arms; but all that she said was, 'My bonnie woman! my bonnie lamb!' words that meant nothing. They waited, it seemed for an hour or more, and then a man's steps sounded slowly and solemnly on the stair, and the doctor with a troubled face looked in. He did not look at Isabel, eagerly as she was confronting him; but cast an appealing glance over her head at Jean Campbell. 'Tell her!' he said, with agitation in his voice. And then the young widow knew.

'God preserve us!' the men were saying in the passage, 'two hours ago he passed, as fine a man as ye could see—and now he's a heap o' motionless clay.'

'There's been foul play,' said John Macwhirter. 'Ye'll never tell me but there's been foul play.'

'But wha could have an ill thought to the minister? He hadna an enemy in the world. Oh, neebors,' said Andrew White, 'we've lost a God-fearing man.'

'It maun have been for robbery,' said another.

'There's nae signs of robbery, except the cambric ruffles a' torn from his shirt and the breastpin he ay wore.'

'That wasna worth much,' said Macwhirter, 'but nae doubt the villain was disturbed and grabbit at the first thing he saw. As ye say, Andrew, he hadna an enemy in the world.'

This conversation the Dominie overheard—the low bass voices of the men sounding strangely concentrated and solemn amid the wailing and tears of the house. Isabel herself had been taken away, capable of no tears as yet. And there was the cheerful kettle singing and steaming, the fire blazing, all the preparations upon the table for the return of the master of the house. And it was thus the minister had come home. The depths of desolation had opened all at once in the mysterious world, and swallowed up this house with all its joys and hopes. But a touch and the whole fairy palace had crumbled into dust and ashes.

CHAPTER XXXI

NOTHING had occurred on Loch Diarmid for ages which had made so intense a sensation in the district as the death of the minister. The whole country bubbled up and seethed about that one house on the slope—the Manse, peaceablest of habitations, a few days ago so full of quiet happiness, but now shrouded in a veil of horror and woe. Was it accident, or was it murder? At first the opinion of the country-side inclined strongly in favour of the former supposition. The beast was ‘spirity’—too spirity for a man of Mr. Lothian’s age; and the night was stormy and dark; and he had not nor could have any enemy—and he was not robbed. It soon, however, became known that there was an actual witness of the tragedy, whose deposition would set all doubts at rest.

‘I hope she didna do it hersel,’ said the smith, when the tale was discussed. ‘I canna understand Jean Campbell being the one to see it.’

The mind of the district was moved with the profoundest longing for news, however small the scrap might be, that was afforded to it. People sprang up on every side who had seen a man about whom they did not recognise as a person known on the Loch. But, then, unfortunately the differences in their descriptions of him were so great that no individual likeness could be made out. One declared he was a perfect giant, another a little hunchback, one that he was dressed like a gentleman, and another that he was the meanest tramp. Jean Campbell was the only witness who had anything to tell; and her story, indeed, was terribly distinct as to the fact, though wanting in every detail that could identify the criminal. She gave her deposition in the narrative form which is always congenial to the peasant mind, and held by it steadily, though her strong, vigorous frame and rude health were almost worn out by what she had seen.

‘I had been to the mill to ask about my meal,’ said Jean; ‘and then I thought I would step in at the Manse and just ask for Mrs. Lothian, who is my stepdaughter. I heard a horse coming in the distance as I came out on the highroad from the awfu’ lonesome lane that leads to the mill. And glad I was to hear it. “Here’s company coming,” I said to myself. Ye’ll maybe no ken the road. There’s a high bank on one side with trees, and on the other you’re just on the braes, that are whins, and heather, and naething else. I was walking slow on that side to let the horseman come up, for it’s an ill bit of the road, and a man’s company is ay canny.

Just afore the horse came up, I was awfu' frichtened wi' a rustling on the bank. It was dark, and ye couldna have seen your hand before you; but I could see there was somebody among the trees, and what would he be doing there? I canna think he saw me, for the bank is awfu' thick with trees, and I was doun among the whin-bushes, and a' dark round and round. The horse came up, galloping as steady as a rock; but, just as it came to me, there was a blast of branches, and stones and moss came rumbling down the bank, just before the beast's very feet. He was a very spirity beast, as a' the parish kens—and he backit, and he reared, and up with his feet in the air, till I was nigh out of my senses with fright. Then there was a whirr first, and I heard a fa' and a groan. It was an awfu' thud, and the groan was an awfu' groan. I think he must have fainted. And I was awfu' feared myself; but before I could recover the man was doun from the brae. There was a break in the clouds for a moment, and I could see him come rumbling down the bank. . . . No, I canna tell you what like he was. It was just a black shadow on the black trees. He went up to the one that had fallen, and me, thinking nae evil, I took heart, and ran up from where I had been among the whins, and went forward too. The one black spot bent ower the other, as if it had been to lift him—and me, it was on my lips to say, "Lord bless us! I'm here too, and we'll save the poor man!" And then I saw a motion, and heard it. . . . Eh, dinna ask me what!—a dull, heavy stroke, and a crack, and another groan. I gave a cry—if he had killed me the next minute I couldna have helped it; and the creature started, and made a grasp at something, and then turned and stared a' round. I gied scream after scream, no able to stop. I had sunk doun among the whins, and he couldna see me. And then he began to speel the brae as fast as he had come doun. I stood there and cried, and durstna stir. And in a whilie doun the lane came Andrew White and his wife and their laddie, with a lantern. And then we saw it was the minister. I was near dead with the fright and the awfu' feeling myself. For weel I saw he had been murdered there where he lay. The laddie ran to the village for help, and Andrew's man came doun from the mill. And when I came to myself, I took my gown ower my head, and ran a' the way till I got to the Manse. . . . Me catch the villain! how could I catch him—and him up like a wild-cat into the wood? Na, I thought of Isabel—I'm meaning of Mrs. Lothian, his poor young wife. And that is a' I can tell you, if ye were to question me till the morn.'

The miller's testimony corroborated Jean's. 'The wife' had cried upon him, as he was sitting down to his supper, to come and listen to the screams from the brae; and Andrew being no coward, and having bowels of compassion, notwithstanding his gloomy view of religious matters, rushed down immediately with his wife and 'the laddie.' He heard a rustling in the wood as he passed, but took no notice, not connecting it, he said, with the accident, and found the minister insensible, and scarcely breathing. He had had a bad fall from his horse, which of itself Andrew thought must have been enough to injure him seriously; and there was besides the fatal blow on the forehead, which had smashed the skull, and extinguished all consciousness and possibility of life. The testimony of the doctor was the only other important point in the evidence. He could not decide whether the other injuries might not have been fatal. That they were very serious, there was no doubt; but it was the blow which had killed Mr. Lothian. As to the man who did it, however, no information could be gathered. He was to Jean but 'a black shadow' in the darkness. She could not even tell what was his height, or dress, or anything about him.

The world of Loch Diarmid was thus utterly at sea, both as to the murderer and as to the motive for the crime. The minister had no enemies; for, to be sure, there was a difference between uttering a spiteful comment on his conduct in the smithy or 'at the doors,' and murdering him in a lonely road under cover of night. The general explanation of the torn ruffle was, that the murderer dimly perceived some ornament on his victim's breast, and snatched at it before he was scared by Jean's cries, which left him no time for further investigation. The poor little brooch, with its setting of pearls, and the two curls of hair intertwined, attained notoriety in the papers, being described elaborately over and over again, in case it should be offered anywhere for sale. But no clue to the murderer was obtained in this way. Then the excitement died out; and 'at the doors,' and on the way to church, and in the smithy, and everywhere else where the parish resorted, all thoughts and criticisms began to centre in the presentee.

But while this gradual softening process acted upon the parish at large, the Manse was left like a desolate island in the midst of all the life and sunshine. All at once, mysteriously, as by a stroke of magic, the light had vanished from it; a sort of dumb horror wrapt the house, abstracting it from the community of which it had been for so long a cheerful centre. Grass began to grow on the path from the gate to the door. Except Miss

Catherine and Jean Campbell, who went and came daily, and messengers with inquiries after Mrs. Lothian, which naturally grew less and less frequent as time went on, nobody visited the house of mourning. Not that there was any lack of popular sympathy for the young widow. There was not a lady in the county who did not make her appearance at the Manse gates, to offer social consolation, or, at least, condolences. But Isabel saw nobody. She was stunned.

Thus the winter closed in again upon the hills, wrapping the closed Manse in all its mists and clouds. While the parish was contending hotly about the presentee, Isabel shut herself up in her house, which was still hers until his appointment should be settled, like the ghost of what she had been. One of the maids was already dismissed, in preparation for the final breaking up. The gardener had gone some time before. And only the sorrowful young mistress, with her widow's cap on her brown curls, and desolation in her heart, and old Kirstin, who had been the minister's housekeeper in old days, dwelt alone in the mournful Manse.

CHAPTER XXXII

IT was a long time after this—almost Christmas—when Isabel's baby was born. Even the Glebe Cottage put on a different aspect with the coming of the new life. The grey parlour, which was so full of memories, the room in which Margaret had died, in which Isabel had been married, and which under other circumstances would have been an awful place to return to, in the renewed and deepened gloom, was all a flutter now with the white robes, the baby-paraphernalia, all the scraps of lace and heaps of muslin in which young mothers find so much delight. The place was metamorphosed and knew itself no longer. It was the centre of a hundred sweet consultations, such gossiping, in the true sense of the word, as renews the female soul. Even Miss Catherine was transfigured by the new event. 'I have gotten a grandchild in my old age,' she said with tears and smiles as she carried little Margaret into the parlour where one of Mr. Lothian's old friends stood waiting by the white-covered table to baptise the fatherless child. It was one of many scenes which were heart-breaking in their pathos to the bystanders, but did not somehow bear the same aspect to the principal actor in them. The old clergyman who performed the ceremony broke down in the midst of it. He was a grandfather himself,

and had not hesitated a year ago to make many a kindly joke upon Lothian's infatuation. But the sight of his old comrade's child, which would have been the crown of his joy, and which he had not even been permitted to know of, was more than the good man could bear. And the Dominie, who was standing by, turned quite round and leaned his grey head upon the wall, and could not suppress the groan which came out of his heart. And Miss Catherine and all the women wept aloud. But Isabel, with her child in her arms, smiled in the midst of all their tears. Her eyes were wet, which made them all the brighter. The excitement of the moment in her weak condition had quickened all the tints of lily and rose in her soft cheeks—the golden life-gleam in her brown hair shone out under her cap like a concealed crown. And she smiled upon them all with a certain wonder at their emotion, facing life and fate and all that could come out of the unknown, tranquil with her treasure in her arms.

'Poor thing!' the Dominie said; 'poor thing!' laying one hand on the mother's young head, and looking down from his great height upon the child, his harsh face all working with emotion. He had hard ado not to weep like the women, and to keep down the climbing sorrow which choked him, in his throat.

'Why poor thing?' said Isabel softly, looking up to him, 'why poor thing? She has me.'

'And you are but a bairn yourself,' said the Dominie, with his broken groan.

'I am her mother,' said Isabel, 'who had I but Margaret? and Margaret was only my sister. And I am young and strong. She has me!'

'My dear,' said the old minister, who with all his sympathy could not let such a speech pass unrebuked, 'she has her Father in Heaven. She has the Father of the fatherless. You must not build on your youth and strength. Have we not all seen what awful change and overturn may happen in a single day?'

And then Isabel looked up at him with her tear-dilated, smiling eyes. It was cruel to thrust back upon her at such a moment the terrible tragedy in which she had such a part. But even that did not discourage the young mother. Two great tears wrung out of their fountains, as if her heart had been suddenly grasped by some harsh hand, dropped from her eyes. Before they fell she had already turned her head with a little start, that they might not drop upon the child. 'I'll live for her,' she said. 'Oh I'll have strength for her—God would never have me leave my baby alone in the world.' And then the smile came back—an invincible smile, not to

be quenched by any discouragement. When she was left alone even, and had no longer that stimulus of self-defence and resistance which came natural to her character, in the silence she still kept her smile. There, where Margaret had died—where she herself had stood up in her white simplicity of maidenhood to be married, she sat by the imperfect light of the fire with her baby asleep on her knees, and defied all fear and sorrow. All the frivolous thoughts of youth had died out of her (so far as she was aware) as much as if she had been Miss Catherine's age. No longing for any love beyond the one she possessed was in her heart. Her sister, and her husband, whom she could scarcely dissociate now the one from the other, had left her on the way. But did not this make amends—this which no one could take away, which was altogether her own?

'Has the lassie no heart?' said the Dominie, as he attended Miss Catherine down the brae. His own was sore for his friend. The minister had been to him a profounder loss than to Isabel; the solace of his life, his companion, the occupation of those evenings which were all that remained to him to enjoy in this world, had all gone with Mr. Lothian. And to think his friend could have thrown away all his love on an insensible woman who could smile over her baby, and forget him so soon! 'This time twelvemonth he was planning where he was to take her—how he was to please her; and now—Have women no hearts?'

'Her heart is full of her child,' said Miss Catherine, with a touch of personal compunction, for she, too, had been thinking of the baby, and not of its father. 'You forget—she was fond of him, and grateful to him, but she might have been his daughter. It was not love like—what was thought of in my day.'

'Or in mine,' said the Dominie.

What the two old people thought in the pause that followed, it is not for us to expound. Surely the world had changed somehow since 'my day,' was colder, less real, less true—and life was growing more and more into such stuff as dreams are made of. But that perhaps was because to both of them—old unwedded, inexperienced souls, the half of life had never been any more than a dream.

'You must not think ill of Isabel,' said Miss Catherine, after a pause. 'Until this hope came to her, she was heart-broken enough, poor bairn! and now she is all for the baby. Had the father been living and well, she would have forgotten his existence in the presence of that child.'

'And that's why I ask,' said the Dominie, with bitterness: 'Have women no hearts?'

‘Some of us,’ said Miss Catherine; and they walked on together along the head of the Loch without exchanging another word.

But it was not the past which occupied Isabel, as she sat, in the firelight, with her baby on her knee. It was chiefly a soft respite from all pains and cares, the sense of ease, and weakness, and repose in the present. And whether it was feminine insensibility, as the Dominie thought, or absorption in her new treasure, or the want of any real love towards her dead husband, certain it is that no longing for him or for anyone was in her mind. What she had was enough for, and filled her up. To find herself, a shipwrecked creature, tossed from one woe to another, finding calm but to lose it again—disappointed, sorrowful, and bereaved—to have suddenly floated once more into this safe, sure haven, so warm and still and satisfying and full of hope, was such a wonder and blessing as silenced all other thoughts. But for the child, what a desert her life would have been! And with the child, was it not a rich garden, to be filled with flowers and fruits and everything that makes existence lovely? Such were her musings, as she sat by the fire, a soft, weak, helpless woman, tired if she went two or three times across the little room, but, nevertheless, fearless to confront life and all it could do to her, no longer languid or discouraged now that she had, not only herself to care for, but her child.

‘My bonnie woman!’ said Jean, coming in, ‘you mustna sit there and think. Ye’ve been real brave, and kept up your heart wonderful; but you mustna think, for her sake as well as your ain.’

‘I am not thinking,’ said Isabel, softly, and for the moment there sprung up in her a certain wonder at her own insensibility. Was she really insensible, unfeeling? She was not moved as they expected her to be. Things that she was encouraged to be brave for, as ‘a trial,’ proved no trial to her. Was it that her heart had sunk into coldness? And yet was it not full of love that ran over and filled every crevice of her being, for the baby on her knee?

‘Tell me, was this your feeling when *they* were born?’ she said, with a little movement of her head towards the other part of the house in which Jean’s children were; ‘that nothing mattered any more—that you could bear everything and forget what it was to grieve, and work and toil and never tire—was that your feeling, too?’

‘Eh, I canna mind what was my feeling,’ said Jean, shaking her head, ‘except that I was awfu’ glad it was over. But your father was living, Isabel, and I had no

need to take that thought—and besides, I was different from you.'

'Ah, my father was living!' said Isabel, with a little gasp, stopped short by the words, although even then she did not apply them to herself with any feeling that her case was harder than that of her stepmother. If it was harder it was sweeter, too, for her child was all her own.

'Awfu' different from you,' said Jean; 'ye can sit still and put a' your bit fancies together, you lady-things that are above common folk; but what I was thinking was, how to get weel and be stirring about the house to keep a' right for the Captain, and Margaret, and you. My weans were what I loved best, I'll no deny it—but they werena my first thought; I had to think of *him* first and the house, and how to please ye a'; and syne took the wee thing to my breast for a comfort. There was ay the work that came first—and maybe when a's done it is the best way.'

'You think I'm idle,' said Isabel, with a faint blush, 'but you shall see how different it will be. I was thinking we might build something on to the cottage—another room, or perhaps two. We have plenty now; and by the time she grows up——'

'Oh, Isabel, ye're like a bairn with a new doll: let the poor infant take a grip of her life before you think of the time when she'll be grown up. Ye'll be for a man to her next.'

'Oh, no, no man,' said Isabel, with a little shiver; 'what should my baby want with a man? She'll be mine as I am hers—my only one, all I have in the world.'

'You're little better than two weans together,' said Jean, looking pitifully down upon the mother and child and drying her eyes. Two-and-twenty, that was the girl's age, with half a century of life still before her, all its stormier, harder part, the heat of the day and the burden. Could she go through the world as she thought, with no wakening of other feelings in her heart—altogether wrapt in this motherly virginal passion for her child? 'She'll be but a young woman stili, when the bairn is twenty,' said Jean to herself from the eminence of her own more advanced age. Such a thing was possible as that the heart thus thrown into one strain should never diverge, nor throb to any other touch. It was possible. But the woman in her experience sighed over it, and dried her eyes with her apron, and softly shook her head.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THUS life went on for months over Loch Diarmid. The minister's dreadful end had fallen into gentle forgetfulness. Another minister was now the referee and head and butt of the parish, discussed in the smithy, criticised 'at the doors.' And he and his wife had been asked to dinner at the neighbouring country-houses, but not with so much success as had attended the *début* of Isabel—and had called upon Mrs. Lothian, 'the last minister's widow,' as the present female incumbent described her, and had not known very well what to make of the girl in her close cap, smiling over her baby—with her strange surroundings, and curious nondescript position. Mrs. Russell, the new minister's wife, asked with a good deal of perplexity, 'Is she a lady? I know she is a great friend of Miss Catherine. But everybody knows Miss Catherine is very odd. Dined at the Marquis's in London, and went to the opera with Lady Mary! I can scarcely believe that. How could Lady Mary, an unmarried girl, take anybody to the opera? She does everything for that child herself—no nurse, nor anything like a nurse; indeed, I am not sure there was any servant at all. The woman I saw in the kitchen was her stepmother, I hear. Naturally it is not very pleasant for us to have the widow of Mr. Russell's predecessor in such a position. Of course I would like to be kind to her if I could, but—— And then the way the people speak of her! For one that calls her Mrs. Lothian, there are half a dozen that say just Isabel, or Isabel at the Glebe, or the Captain's Isabel, or some country name like that. I can tell you it's very embarrassing for me.'

This little statement, which was made to Mrs. Campbell of Maryburgh, the nearest clergywoman of the district, and to Mrs. Diarmid of Ardgartan, and even to the doctor's wife in the parish, got into circulation through the malice or amusement of these ladies, and roused a little flutter of indignation on Loch Diarmid, where Isabel's position was so fully understood, and where she was known beyond all controversy to be a lady born—whereas of Mrs. Russell herself nobody knew anything. But it did not disturb the quiet at the Glebe, where Baby Margaret reigned supreme, shutting out all the outer world with her small presence, her quick coming smiles, the gradual 'notice' she took of the external world to which she had come, her first recognition of the devoted vassals about her. Her first little pearly tooth was a greater event than the Reform Bill,

which happened somewhere about that time; and it may well be supposed that the first time the small princess visibly indicated her knowledge and preference of her mother was more to Isabel than if the Queen had called upon her, much less Lady Mary. The cottage was all absorbed and wrapt up in the child for that first year of her existence. On the whole, perhaps, it is no great testimony to the female intelligence, that it can thus permit itself to be swallowed up in adoring contemplation and tendance of a helpless, speechless infant, with no intellectual existence at all.

'I cannot understand you women,' said the Dominie; 'if she keeps content it is more than I can fathom. No—if her heart had been dead like the hearts of some—but her heart has never been right awakened; and if there was any word, say of that English lad——'

'Lord, preserve us!' cried Miss Catherine, holding up her hands in dismay; 'you don't mean to say, Mr. Galbraith, that we're threatened with him back.'

'I say only what I hear,' said the Dominie. 'They were saying in John Macwhirter's last night that he had been seen looking at the beasts on Smeaton's farm; and he should be well known at Smeaton's farm, if anywhere. There's a fine breed of cattle to be roupit.'

'Oh, yes, I know all about that,' said Miss Catherine, who had endeavoured in vain to secure some of the cattle in question. 'Archie Smeaton's a worldly-minded body, and ay hankering after more siller. But to bring that lad back—the only man I have any fear of in the world! No, no, it is you that makes me doubt poor Isabel. With her bairn in her arms there's no man in the world she would ever look at; we need not fear that.'

The Dominie shook his head. 'It may be nature,' he said; 'you should know better than me—but at three-and-twenty, to give up all your life to an infant, and never seek more in this world, is what I cannot comprehend. If her heart was crushed and dead it might be so, but that is not the case. I am not saying you are right or you are wrong, but it's very strange to me.'

'And for one thing, she must not know,' said Miss Catherine, with an anxious look in her face; 'neither you nor me will say a word to let her know?'

The Dominie turned away with a grim smile. 'If that is all your certainty,' he said, 'there's no such great difference between us.' They exchanged a few more anxious words, standing together half-way up the ascent, and then Miss Catherine continued her walk towards the Glebe.

'You have heard of something that vexes you,' said Isabel, when, after all due court had been paid to the

little princess, Miss Catherine sat wearily down and sank into a kind of abstraction; and then the old lady roused herself up with a guilty start.

'Me!—no,' said Miss Catherine; 'what could I have that would vex me?—except just one thing, Isabel, my dear, if you will promise not to be frightened. There's measles about. Jenny Spence's second youngest—the one that was the baby——'

'But he's better,' said Isabel, breathless. 'It was last month he was ill.'

'You can never say when they're better,' said Miss Catherine, solemnly; 'and I heard they had it up at the toll on the Kilcranion road; and if one of the Chalmers' bairns has not the whooping-cough, my ears are not to be trusted. But you must not be frightened. I was thinking if we were to take a week or two at the Bridge of Allan——'

'Oh, my darling!' Isabel was saying, with her lips on her baby's cheek, whom she had seized out of its cradle in her panic. Miss Catherine's guilty heart smote her, but she was not a woman to be diverted by a mere compunction from pursuing what she felt to be the safe way.

'My dear, you promised me not to take any panic,' she said; 'there is no occasion. You take your walks on the braes, and not through the village; and Margaret has never been so far all her days as the toll-gate. But just to keep you easy, and her clear of all danger, I think you and me, Isabel, might go cannily away to the Bridge of Allan to-morrow. It would do us both good.'

'You would not say that, if you thought there was no danger,' said Isabel. 'Oh, what would I do if anything happened to my darling? Should I take her away to-night?'

'There is no such hurry as that,' said Miss Catherine; and then turned to confront Jean Campbell, whom it was more difficult to blind, and with whom it had been impossible to have any private communication. 'We are going off to the Bridge of Allan,' she said, with a faint conciliatory smile; 'we are just making up our minds all at once. A change would do Isabel good; and as for the child, babies are always the better for a change of air.'

'And there's measles in the village, and whooping-cough,' said Isabel, pressing her baby to her heart.

'No such thing,' said Jean. 'Measles!—Jenny Spence's bairns had them, but they're all better a month ago; and there's nae kink-cough I've heard of atween this and Maryburgh. Na, if it's for your pleasure, that's different. But eh! dinna tempt Providence by getting into a panic when there's nae trouble near.'

'I think you're wrong about the kink-cough,' said Miss Catherine. 'There's one of Peter Chalmers's boys——'

'He's had that cough as long as I can mind,' said Jean. 'Na, na, my bonnie woman, dinna you be feared; there's naething catching in the parish but I'm sure to hear of it. Put down the bairn, and let her sleep.'

'Well, I am of a different opinion,' said Miss Catherine; 'and I'm wearying for a change. I'll take my maid, Marion, who is very experienced about bairns, and we'll start in the morning to-morrow with the boat. I cannot stay, Isabel, my dear. Keep up a good heart, and the fine air yonder will make you look like two roses, the baby and you.—Lord preserve us, woman!' said Miss Catherine, turning round upon Jean, to whom she had made a sign to follow her, as soon as they were outside the door, 'could ye not see I had a reason? and was making you signs enough to rouse a whole parish—if she had not been so taken up with the bairn.'

'Me!—how could I tell?' said Jean, surprised; 'and I couldna find it in my heart to put her in such trouble, and it no true.'

'Nonsense about putting her in trouble!' said Miss Catherine, energetically. 'Perhaps you would like better to wring her heart, and bring in another man to her, and turn all her peace to distress once more.'

'What man?' asked Jean, seizing with instant penetration the point at question.

'Yon English lad!'

'Eh, me!' said Jean Campbell, 'blessings on you for a quick thought, and a quicker act. I heard he had been seen over the hill. I'll swear it's the kink-cough!' she added, under her breath; and so the bargain was made.

It was the first night of pain Isabel had spent since her baby was born. It seemed to her as if she ought to get up and fly away with her through the darkness, to escape from so terrible a danger; and she went back a hundred times to the cradle after the little Margaret had been disposed of for the night to listen to her breathing, and look at her little rosebud face, and touch her tiny fingers, and make sure she had not caught anything.

'The bairn's as well as ever she was in her life,' Jean said at last, with a little impatience, as this process went on.

'But you said there was whooping-cough about,' said Isabel.

'I said it might be,' said Jean, 'for anything I ken; but, eh, why do you think our bairn should get it, and no other bairn a' the country round?'

'Because she is all I have in the world,' said Isabel,

with a sudden fall out of the soft content in which her life had been wrapped.

Jean did not know of the revolution which that moment made. She saw the brown eyes open wide and flash in the soft, domestic light, but had no insight to perceive how Isabel had suddenly stumbled, as it were, against the limits of her lot, and woke up to see that her happiness was as a flower on the edge of a precipice, that all her life was concentrated in this one blossom, against which nature itself, and the winds and the rains, and the summer heats and the autumn chill, were ready to rise up. Most mothers have gone through that same sudden gleam of imagination, and beheld Heaven and earth contending against the child in whose frail ship of life all their venture of happiness was embarked. Isabel saw herself standing as on the brink of a more dreadful destruction than she had ever dreamt of, and her very soul failed within her. It could not last. Before any new influence came in, the Dominie's words had proved themselves, though in a sense different from anything he understood.

'Oh, if harm were to come to her!' cried Isabel, with a sudden, low, stifled cry.

'Weel, weel,' said Jean, in her calm voice, 'that's what you're ay thinking as soon as ye hae weans. What if everything should gang against ye? what if trouble should come in a moment, and leave a' the rest, and strike yours? Ye mustna gie way to that, Isabel. What if the lift were to fa' and smoor the laverocks? No, no, my bonnie woman! It's no you nor me that can guard the bairn from whatever's coming, but just God—if it's His will.'

'And if it were not His will?' said Isabel, driven from despair to despair.

'Then ye would have to submit,' said Jean, didactic and almost solemn, 'as you've done before. There's nae striving against God.'

And then silence fell upon the little grey room, in which the fire flickered cheerfully, and the child slept, and Isabel's heart beat. It had been beating so quietly up to this moment, and now what wild throbs it gave against her breast! Ah, yes! God's will had to be submitted to, whatever it was—God's will, which had carried Margaret, twenty years old, to her bed in the churchyard, and laid the minister in his blood beside her. 'Oh,' sighed Isabel, 'to be with them! to have everything over that must happen! to rest and know that nothing could happen more!'

'And mony folk would tell ye,' said Jean, momentarily forgetting her compact with Miss Catherine, 'that to

run away as soon as ye hear of trouble was tempting Providence, as if God couldna smite in the steamboat or the coast, as well as in your ain house. No that I'm of that way of thinking,' she added, hastily recollecting herself. 'This change will do the bairn good, and it will do you good, and relieve your mind. Na, Isabel, ye must not take fancies into your head, or think that things are worse than they are. There's little Margaret the picture of health.'

Isabel turned away, and threw herself down noiselessly on her knees by the side of her child's cradle. The baby's breathing was regular and soft; its hand was thrown up over its head, with the unconscious grace of infancy; its attitude full of ease and perfect repose.

She lay all the night through with her child breathing sweetly beside her, debating the question with herself—Should she remain, and put her fate into God's hands, and perhaps propitiate Him by such an appearance of trust? She did not sleep, but lay in the rustling palpable darkness, sometimes fancying the child's breathing grew hurried, sometimes that it stopped altogether, and looking all kinds of horrors in the face. She rose from her bed in the same uncertainty; and the day was cold, and Jean wavered, doubting whether such an uncertain and distant danger as that of the 'English lad's' reappearance was sufficient inducement for the immediate sacrifice demanded of her.

'I doubt it's an east wind,' Jean said, as she went into Isabel's room to call her; 'I doubt it's tempting Providence;' and went about all her arrangements languidly, with no goodwill in them. 'I'll put in all her warm winter things,' she said, as she packed the box for them; 'ye maun take awfu' care of cold. Travelling is ay dangerous, and at *her* age, the bonnie lamb!'

'Oh, tell me,' said Isabel, suddenly throwing her arms round her stepmother's neck. 'I am distracted, thinking one thing and another. Should I go, or should I stay——?'

Jean paused. She was put on her honour. It was hard to part with the baby, and allow old Marion, Miss Catherine's maid, to get her hands upon it. But she had given her word. And then 'another man' was something too frightful to be contemplated; and Isabel was young, and had once loved Stapylton, or thought she loved him. It was hard upon her stepmother to be obliged to decide; but she did so magnanimously for Isabel's good.

'It's no so cold as I thought,' she said. 'The wind's only in the north. It's no a warm wind, but it's no dangerous, like the east; and if you keep her well and keep her warm, and no trust too much to Marion, who

knows nothing about bairns, no doubt a change of air would do her good.'

And after a while Miss Catherine's carriage came to the door, and took the mother and the child away.

CHAPTER XXXIV

STEAMBOATS were novel luxuries in those days; but the West of Scotland was in the van of such improvements, and Loch Diarmid had secured for itself one of the earliest of those little fussy agents of civilisation and trade. The steamboat fretted its silvery bosom daily, opening up the world to the hill folk, to whom, in former days, the means of descent to the ordinary level of humanity were difficult. The steamboat fussed its little way from point to point, touching at the little piers on each side of the Loch, and at less populous corners approached by boats, the universal means of communication throughout the district. The Lochhead was its terminus and starting-point, and the little party from the House were installed in the best places and received with that rustic Scotch courtesy which, though not deferential, is so cordial and friendly. Thus they went gliding along, alive to all the interests around them, when the steamer slackened its course opposite Brandon and waited for the ferry-boat. The ladies did not take much notice of the ferry-boat. Their attention was fully fixed on Ardnamore. It was a homely, old-fashioned, whitewashed house, standing high on the brae, with a steep green slope surrounded by trees, cleared in front of it, and the white walls nestling into the darker heather of the summit above. The gable window was in a projecting wing, and all the rest of the house was still closed, which made it more remarkable still to see a human figure there.

'Can they have come home?' said Miss Catherine.

'Oh, no—never that,' said Isabel; 'perhaps it is only the housekeeper. She might be putting the house in order for the fine weather.'

'Or they may have had sense enough to let it, if they cannot take the good of it,' said Miss Catherine; 'it is a good house. There are—let me see—five, six, nine bedrooms, if I mind rightly; two in that wing, and one on the ground-floor, and the rest at the back, looking out on the hill. And the drawing-room is a pretty room, painted in panels, and all the length of the house. Oh me—if Magdalene Diarmid could have lived to see her only son wandering about the world as he is doing—'

'But that is better than what went before,' said Isabel. Her eyes had been fixed on the house, which already began to grow dim in the distance, as the steamer continued its course. And then she turned her head, with a little natural sigh, thinking of Ailie and all that had happened since the two prophets disappeared into the world. She turned round, thinking of nothing beyond that limited local circle, and, raising her calm eyes suddenly, all at once encountered another pair, which were gazing at her. She started so that it seemed to her the very vessel staggered and thrilled, and gave a low suppressed cry. For the moment 'all that had happened,' and even the child she held in her arms, grew into a mist round Isabel. The eyes she had so suddenly looked up into unawares, and which were gazing upon her with extraordinary intensity, were those of the man she had once loved. Stapylton, from whom she was, without knowing it, flying, stood within half a dozen paces of her, on the narrow deck.

Miss Catherine heard the cry, low as it was, and felt the start with which her companion made this discovery; and turning round, saw, with feelings indescribable, the man from whose very shadow she was escaping, standing by her, taking off his hat, and claiming recognition as an acquaintance. She grew pale, and then crimson, with consternation and excitement, and in that awful moment ran over all the possibilities in her mind. Should she land at the next landing-place, thus betraying her motives to Isabel, and proceed on their journey by some other route? Should she turn back and go home, now the dreaded meeting had been accomplished? Should she admit the claims of civility, or refuse to know him altogether? But Isabel was a free agent. She was not indifferent to the sight of him. Her start had been sufficiently evident to attract the attention of any bystander. He must have seen it himself, so near as he was, and with all his attention fixed upon them. Therefore, if it were but to shield Isabel, Miss Catherine felt that civility was her only policy. It cost her an effort to bow her proud old head in answer to his salutation; but she did it, taking the conversation and all the burdens of politeness upon herself.

'It is something quite unexpected seeing you,' she said, 'Mr. Stapylton; are you here on a visit, or have you come to stay?'

'I am going away,' he said, half-indicating with his hand a little pile of luggage. Miss Catherine ventured to take breath. If that were all, things might not turn out so badly; and she felt able to note his looks, and the changes that time had wrought in him. The first thing

she observed was, that he was intensely pale, and that he looked at Isabel, in her mourning-dress, with a trembling about the muscles of his mouth, and nervous movement of his hands, which betrayed some very strong feeling. Why should he be moved like that to see her, after abandoning her, leaving her to be wooed by the minister, showing no sign of recollection for all these years? And yet the indications of feeling about him were too marked to be unreal; and Miss Catherine, hard as she felt it her duty to be, could not but feel a certain womanish compassion for him in her heart.

'You can have made but a short stay, since we have heard nothing of you,' she said; 'you were at Archie Smeaton's, I suppose, over the hill.'

'For some little time,' he said, 'and I heard from him,' lowering his voice, with a glance at Isabel, who had betrayed her recollection of him only by a slight movement of her head—'of many things which grieved me much.'

Was this the old flippant, arrogant, unsympathetic 'English lad?' He had grown much thinner Miss Catherine decided, looking at him. His voice was subdued; the very lines of his face refined and altered. His aspect, long ago, had been that of a somewhat surly, self-sufficient youth, careless of what anybody thought of him, ready to meet reproof half way; now everything seemed softened, toned down, and improved. Yes, improved. She could not deny it to herself.

'Yes,' she said, hastily, 'there have been changes; but no doubt you would hear of the chief of them at the time they happened. We will not go over an old story. You have been in distress yourself, if I am to judge by your dress.'

'Yes,' he said; 'my father is dead; but he lingered long after the time I left the Loch so hurriedly. I was kept in close attendance upon him for nearly a year. He had a tedious illness. But for that I should have returned sooner; and, I am sorry to say,' he added, 'my position is not quite so good as I had hoped.'

When he paused, inviting sympathy, Miss Catherine found herself obliged to show some sign of interest. Isabel had not spoken. She was busy with the baby, whispering to it, encouraging its play with old Marion, the maid, who had come to her other side, with a perfect understanding of the position, 'to take off her attention.' But yet Isabel had betrayed that his affairs were not indifferent to her. At this point she raised her brown eyes to him with a questioning look, much more significant than words. It asked, more plainly than her lips could have done, what it was, and all about it? And

then the eyes sank confused—becoming conscious. All this pantomime Miss Catherine saw and noted with an ache in her heart.

‘I have been in America this last year, looking about,’ he said. ‘I am cut off, if not with a shilling, still with a very poor remnant of what I ought to have had. What with my mother and sisters, and all the rest—but I cannot expect you to be interested in this,’ he added, looking at her pointedly, and then at Isabel.

‘I am sorry you’ve been disappointed,’ said Miss Catherine. ‘I hope you have good prospects now.’

He shrugged his shoulders and then he stretched out his hand for one of the folding-stools which stood about the deck, and sat down in front of the little party, commanding it. ‘I am thinking of settling in America,’ he said.

‘I have heard it is a very fine thing to do,’ Miss Catherine answered with alacrity, ‘for a young man.’

And then there was a pause—Isabel did not even look up this time; but her absorbed face as she arranged her child’s dress, the nervous twitch of her fingers, her apparent blank of inattention, told their own tale to the anxious observer at her elbow. Did he observe it too? He did not seem to look at Isabel, but—‘it cannot be for me he is coming so close, and staying so long,’ Miss Catherine said to herself.

‘I had thought of Scotland once,’ he said; ‘I have let my own place; no chance of keeping that up at present—and if I could hear of a good farm—’

‘Dear me, I would think that was a poor business for the like of you,’ said Miss Catherine: ‘farming makes no fortunes nowadays. For a young active man, with no encumbrance, I would say America was the thing.’

‘I suppose it is,’ he said, with a little sigh; and looked at Isabel with eyes that were almost wistful. She took no notice of him. She behaved in every respect as Miss Catherine would have had her behave, had she instructed her previously in the matter, holding up little Margaret to old Marion, taking share in the play, and when that was no longer necessary, giving her attention to her baby’s dress, keeping her eyes and hands and mind occupied. Just as she ought to have behaved, but yet, in the very perfection of this conduct, there was something which alarmed her guardian. The calmness was too elaborate, the composure too carefully put on; after the first start too, and anxious look of her appealing eyes:

But it was clear there was nothing more to be made of this. He pushed his seat away from them a little as if owning himself discomfited. ‘And you are going away?’ he said.

'Only for a day or so—only—not for long I mean—to pay a visit,' said Miss Catherine, feeling the warfare carried into her own country; and then there was another embarrassed pause. 'You will excuse us, I am sure, Mr. Stapylton,' she went on taking courage. 'But you see Mrs. Lothian has scarcely gone at all into society—I mean has seen nobody since. And you will perceive that here in public, with all these folk about, and seeing any stranger for the first time—'

'I understand,' said Stapylton. The sound of the name, *Mrs. Lothian*, had given him evidently a painful thrill. He rose to his feet when he heard it, and grew once more quite pale. Mrs. Lothian! He took off his hat and withdrew with a delicacy of feeling for which she had not given him credit. Was it possible that she could have done Stapylton injustice after all?

And he kept apart as long as they remained together in the steamer. When they were landing at Maryburgh he did indeed approach for an instant to make himself of use to them, but without a word or look, so far as she was aware, which a saint could have censured. She did not hear, it is true, the five words which somehow dropped into Isabel's ear when she found herself standing dizzy and agitated on the pier, 'I shall see you again;' that was all. But Miss Catherine did not hear them, or perhaps she would have been less softened in respect to Stapylton, and less satisfied that he was finally got rid of, and to be seen no more.

Isabel was a perplexity to her friend for all the rest of the journey. Instead of the cheerful stir there had been about her when she started, she had fallen back upon herself. Her eyes looked heavy, a *sour* excitement seemed to hang about her, which her anxious companion could not explain. It was not the natural thrill of recollection which might have moved a young woman under such circumstances, she thought, but a certain suppressed painful tumult of mind to which Miss Catherine had no clue. But for one thing, she was more absorbed than ever, if that were possible, in her baby. She scarcely spoke, except to little Margaret, to whom she pointed out everything, as if the child could understand her, fidgeting about her dress, fastening and unfastening the wraps round her, inventing a hundred little occupations to fix her attention to her child. She would not allow Marion, who had been looking forward to the delight of assuming the management of the baby, to touch her, but left Miss Catherine at once on their arrival to put little Margaret to bed. 'Marion will do that; the bairn knows her,' said Miss Catherine, but Isabel only shook her head. 'No, I cannot part with my

baby,' she said, and went away burying herself with the child in her own room, where, after a long interval, she was found hugging it in her arms, having as yet made no progress in its toilette. Then Miss Catherine began to get alarmed.

'My dear,' she said, 'the tea is waiting. I came to look at her in her bed, the darling! You're thinking of the time we were here before, Isabel; but you must not give way to your feelings, and such a treasure in your arms. You must think of the bairn.'

'And so I do think of her,' cried Isabel, straining the child so passionately to her breast that little Margaret, unused to such violence, began to whimper with fright, and put out her baby arms to Miss Catherine. Then Isabel's excitement broke forth in weeping. She almost thrust the child into Miss Catherine's arms, and covered her face with her hands. '*She turns from me too,*' she cried, with floods of sudden burning tears. And little Margaret, half for sympathy, out of an infant's strange forlorn consciousness of something unusual in the air, cried too, and the scene altogether became so painful that Miss Catherine lost heart.

'I cannot understand you, Isabel,' she said. 'There are no memories here to make you heart-broken like this, and nobody is turning from you that I know of. I have come away with you myself, though I've plenty to do at home. And there is not one of your friends but would make a sacrifice to see you happy. What is the matter? You have always been happy with your baby. Why should you change now?'

'I have not changed,' said Isabel, under her breath.

'I hope not, my dear,' said Miss Catherine, giving back the child into her arms. 'I suppose it is coming out into the world for the first time, and seeing—strangers; and coming to a new place. I would not wonder, for my part; but you have ay been so good, and so reasonable and patient—since *she* came.'

'And so I shall be,' said Isabel, hastily drying her eyes; 'as long as she is well, oh, what can harm me? I want nothing but my lamb.' And then she began, with a thousand caresses, to undress the little weary creature, kissing its round limbs and dimples with a kind of passion. Miss Catherine sat looking on somewhat grimly, not understanding this outbreak of feeling more than the other, but unable in any way to connect either Isabel's tears or her demonstrations of maternal adoration with that unlucky encounter in the boat. She did not understand, and she could not sympathise, but sat looking on with that grim air of observation and criticism which winds an excited mind up to almost delirium. Isabel

finished her task under those severe, yet kindly eyes, growing more and more agitated and nervous. She was in the state so common to women, when tears are the only practicable utterance. Tears, meaningless words in Margaret's ear, who could soothe but not understand, and such quietness as she might have had in her own house, would have composed her after the shock she had received; but Miss Catherine's steady presence, restraining the tears and compelling a certain amount of external self-control, prolonged the inward pain, and the evening passed like a painful dream.

'It cannot be the recollections of the place,' said Miss Catherine to her maid, when Isabel had escaped to her room, 'for I cannot recollect that the poor minister was ever here; and it cannot be any fright about the bairn. There's neither measles nor whooping-cough that we know of in this place.'

'And neither was there at home,' said Marion. 'Oh, mem, it's no for me to be the judge—but it's like flying in the very face of Providence and tempting God.'

'I was not asking your advice on the subject,' said Miss Catherine, sharply. She was not, indeed, in the way of asking anyone's advice. But anger towards her old maid was impossible, and the next moment she had again begun to discuss the troublesome matter, talking not so much with Marion as aloud with herself.

'It's near a year now,' she said; 'poor thing! it would have been hard for her to have been at that quiet Glebe with nothing to take off her thoughts the very time it happened. The change will make it pass easier; the measles and the rest was but an excuse to get her away.'

'And do you think, mem, she was that fond of the minister?' said Marion, with respectful scepticism.

'She was his wife, woman,' said her mistress, indignantly; 'what would you have more?'

'But, ah, far more like his daughter,' said Marion. 'Nae doubt it was an awfu' end; but when it's no just heart's love—— Do ye think there could be anything in the meeting with yon young English lad to-day?'

'What do you mean by anything?' said Miss Catherine, sharply.

'Eh, I wasna setting up my ain puir judgment; but I thought you looked a wee anxious yourself. And as for Mrs. Lothian, poor lassie, she was shaking like an aspen leaf——'

'Marion, I request you'll speak no more such nonsense to me,' said Miss Catherine, with indignation. 'What is he to her, think ye?—a stranger that has not been seen in the parish for three or four years?'

'And that's true, Miss Catherine,' said Marion, with a

cough expressive of much doubt and general uncertainty. Her mistress lost her temper, and immediately fell upon Marion, not on this subject, but on some other totally unconnected with it; but the experienced handmaiden was in little doubt as to the real occasion of her wrath. 'As if I didna ken the Captain's Isabel cared more for that lad's little finger than for the minister and a' he could do for her!' she said to herself, as she retired to her rest.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE visit to the Bridge of Allan was anything but a successful expedition on the whole. Little Margaret took cold, and had a trifling illness, which filled her three slaves with trembling terror; and Isabel was so much disposed, with unconscious superstition, to regard this as 'a judgment' on her own distracted thoughts and wavering mind, that she was not a pleasant companion to Miss Catherine, who, on the other hand, blamed herself for her over-confidence in her own opinion, for exposing the child to bodily risk and the mother to temptation. Marion made no small amount of critical observations to herself behind their backs, thinking the child's illness also 'a judgment.' 'Them that flees from the Lord, the Lord's hand will find them out,' said Marion to herself. And the little party was not a happy one. They remained until after the anniversary of Mr. Lothian's murder, of which Miss Catherine was rather disposed to make a solemnity. Poor Isabel, with her heart still trembling for her child, and still suffering from the sharp assault of the new life which had taken her at unawares, found it difficult enough to force back her thoughts into the channel of the past, and feel all the grief, the heavy weight of recollection that was expected of her.

After the anniversary was over they went home. It was on a brilliant June day—a warm, languid, breathless afternoon, when the steamer once more carried them up Loch Diarmid. Miss Catherine herself looked round her with an anxious air when she first stepped on board, involuntarily feeling that *he* might be there again way-laying them. Isabel did not look for him, but an excitement which she could not conquer took possession of her. It seemed to herself that she was coming home to wait for him, and that, sooner or later, he must come to the place he knew so well to disturb her life. The Lady of the Manor recognised group after group, and speculated with Marion, as there was no satisfaction to be got from Isabel, upon their different errands. 'There's John

Campbell has been settling his son in Glasgow,' she said. 'I hope it will not turn the lad's head. They're a very pushing family. But I can't tell what the smith's wife should have to do so often in Maryburgh, wasting her time and spending her siller. Marion, is that Archibald Smeaton I see there at the other end of the boat? Go and ask him if the queys are all sold, and what price they brought; and here!—listen—ye can ask him,' said Miss Catherine, aside into Marion's ear, 'if yon Englishman is still about the Loch.'

While Marion went upon this commission there was a momentary pause in Miss Catherine's talk—partly because Isabel was unresponsive, and partly because she was anxious as to the answer which might be returned to the last question. But her eyes were not the less busy scanning the shores of the Loch with that strange interest which a local notability takes in every symptom of change that may have become visible in his or her absence. She gave a sudden exclamation at one point as they went on, and seized upon Isabel's arm, forcibly calling her attention.

'Look at Ardnamore!' cried Miss Catherine, with a gasp of surprise. Isabel started and lifted her eyes. The house was all open to the rays of the setting sun, the very door was standing wide open, and every appearance of inhabitation was about the place. But what was most wonderful of all was the apparition of a white figure fully revealed in the intense light, standing on the green clearing of the lawn. The trees were all so thick around, and the yellow, slanting sunset shone so full upon the green slope and the one figure on it, that it was difficult to pass it without notice. All the windows were lit up with a glow as of illumination; the green trees were almost reddened by the rays; the white walls of the house blazed with intensity of tone; and the one woman stood in the midst of it all, looking out with a certain wistful, lingering patience in her attitude. Perhaps imagination only conferred upon this white figure, which was too distant to be seen, the qualities of expectation and patience. But the whole scene struck the travellers with a shock of surprise.

'And no one ever told me a word about it,' Miss Catherine said, with indignation. 'Can he have had the sense to let the house—or can they have come back? but then who was that?'

'It was Ailie,' said Isabel.

'It was no such thing,' said Miss Catherine. 'Ailie, indeed! My dear, you are thinking of something else, and you have not looked at her. That is the figure of a gentlewoman. They must have woke up to their

interests at last, and let the house. An English family, I would not wonder. But even an Englishwoman can have no need to put on a moonstruck look like that.'

'You are speaking of my wife,' said someone at Miss Catherine's ear.

Like most people who live among their inferiors, she had a way of expressing her sentiments without any constraint of her voice or concealment of her opinion. She was a person of importance, and she was very well aware of the fact; consequently she started, and turned round, not well pleased, to ask the intruder what he meant by thrusting himself into private conversation; but was struck dumb, and all the strength taken out of her for the moment, to find Mr. John himself standing by her side. Isabel was roused and startled too. It was, indeed, her little cry of recognition which persuaded Miss Catherine that the apparition was real and undeniable.

'John Diarmid!' she cried, with a voice half choked with wonder and curiosity; and then made a dead pause, looking at him with a surprise too great for speech.

'You must beware how you speak of my wife,' he said. 'Yes, we have come home. I have brought her home—and she is no longer Ailie, but my wife. If you would be a friend to either of us, you might show an example to others, and not lead the way to trouble.'

'Trouble—what trouble?' said Miss Catherine; 'and why should I be a friend to you, John Diarmid, or set anybody an example to do you pleasure?'

'Why should you be a foe?' he said.

And then they both paused, and looked at each other. Mr. John's appearance had changed. It was nearly three years since he had left Loch Diarmid with his wife; and the wild look of passion and excitement which had marked the prophet had died out of his face. But his appearance was more strange to homekeeping eyes than it had been even when his face was lighted up with that glance which was half-insanity. He had acquired the foreign air which in those days was given by a beard; and his dress, too, was foreign; and there was about him that indescribable look which is not English, which has come to be conventionally identified with the conspirator and revolutionary. He had a great cloak on his arm—a Spanish cloak capable of being thrown around him after a fashion not impossible in those days, though now identified with, at the least, a Byronic hero. His dark face, so much as could be seen of it in the forest of dark hair and darker beard, was more like that of an Italian than a Scotchman; his aspect was that of a man full of weighty cares and responsibilities. The

wild inspiration of his supposed mission had gone from him; but it was not only that he had lost that: something also there was, which the keen-sighted spectators perceived without understanding, which he had acquired. He looked at Miss Catherine without flinching, but with no excitement, meeting her eye calmly, and repeating what he had already said.

'Why should you be a foe? I am none to you. You might be a protection to my wife. Am I to understand that my sins have been such that you will not forget what is past, and give your countenance to her? It might be a comfort to her,' he said with a suppressed sigh.

'I cannot see what other protection your wife wants, John Diarmid, when you are here.'

'But I am not likely to be here,' he said, quietly. 'I have many things on my hands. I am here to-day, and gone to-morrow. Poor thing! she is alone; her own friends are unlike her now. You saw her standing there——'

'You have made a lady of her,' said Miss Catherine, with a half-congratulation, half-reproach.

'I have made her——' he said, and paused. 'No, I have made her nothing; nought of it is my doing. It is another than I that must bear the blame.'

'Then there is blame to be borne?' said Miss Catherine. 'John Diarmid, I know nothing about your history since you've been away; but if you've been unkind to that poor lass, after making her marry you——'

'My kinswoman,' he said, with a faint touch of scorn not distinct enough to be called a sneer, 'what I have done to her is of little consequence. It is God Who has been unkind to her. Don't start as if I spoke blasphemy. *She* can see but one way of working——'

'Then I suppose,' said Miss Catherine, vehemently, 'you've given up the trade of prophet for yourself? I thought as much—and left her, poor weak thing! to bear the burden. And what is your way of working now?'

'You have no right to speak to me so,' said Mr. John. 'I have given up no trade; but I see it is by nations and peoples, and not by single men, that the reformation of the world is to be accomplished. Why should I explain my views to you? You would not understand me. What I wish is that you would protect her as a woman and my kinswoman might, when I am not here to do it.'

'And why should you not be here to do your duty yourself, John Diarmid?' said Miss Catherine. 'You

have done her all the honour a man can do a woman, and it's your place to stand by her now.'

'Honour!' he said, and uttered an impatient, weary sigh. 'It might have been better for her had she never come to such honour.' Isabel, who had been listening eagerly, though she had not spoken, heard the exclamation which was muttered between his teeth, and in her hasty heart rebelling against Miss Catherine's coldness, felt it was time for her to interfere.

'Mr. John,' she said, 'I am not just Isabel, as when you knew me—but Mrs. Lothian. I will go to Ailie, and—take care of her, as much as I can, while you are away.'

Miss Catherine turned and looked upon her with almost as much consternation as if it had been Baby Margaret who spoke. And as for Mr. John, the strangest change came over his face. His large fiery eyes, in which excitement still lurked, though it was unlike the excitement of old, softened over with a glimmer as of tears. He went up to her, close to her, as if it would have given him pleasure to lay his hand on her head, or her shoulder—'Is the child yours?' he said. 'Tell me its name.'

'Margaret,' said Isabel, under her breath.

'I thought it was Margaret; God bless her!' he said, with something between a sigh and a moan; and then waved his hand and left them hurriedly, going to the other side of the boat, and turning his face to the opposite shore. Thus he left them as abruptly as he had come to them, leaving Isabel's offer of service totally unanswered. To him as well as to Miss Catherine it was as if a child had spoken; and Isabel's voice was like her sister's, and the deeper expression which had come into her face made the fundamental resemblance of the two faces more striking. It was to John Diarmid as if his dead love herself had risen up to offer her protection to the woman who was his wife.

'So, Isabel, you've taken Ailie under *your* protection? You are a married woman, no doubt,' said Miss Catherine, with emphatic scorn; 'but you'll not find it an easy task to introduce Mrs. Diarmid of Ardnamore in the county, you may take my word.'

'Was I thinking of the county?' cried Isabel. 'Oh, Miss Catherine, how can you be so kind and so cruel? I was thinking of her heart breaking, and her comfort lost—'

'Her comfort lost?' cried Miss Catherine. 'The comforts of Janet Macfarlane's cottage were you thinking of? I am not so high-flown. It is plenty, I hope, for Ailie to have gained her purpose, and got herself made

lawful mistress of Ardnamore, without exacting protection, which means introductions, from either you or me.'

'Oh! you cannot think that was her purpose,' cried Isabel, fully roused; but by this time the pier was reached, and Jean Campbell's anxious face was visible, looking out for the travellers, and all the familiar landscape opened before them.

She was very subdued and pensive when she re-entered her own home—the home which now was her only shelter upon earth—her first, and, as she thought, her last dwelling-place. Not positively sorrowful, but softly and full of musings and melancholy thoughts. When the child was put to bed she went and sat by the window, and watched the lingering night out, through the long, long twilight, and sweet wavering darkness lit with stars.

'You're sitting in the dark,' said Jean Campbell, coming in. 'Eh, Isabel, my dear, I canna bide to see ye sitting that idle, with nae light. You're thinking, and that makes sorrow. I thought you were tired with your journey and in your bed, which would be a better place.'

'No, it is not sorrow,' said Isabel, softly; 'it is the long day and the bonnie night. It is not dark yet, and I was doing nothing. Do you think she is looking well, now you've seen her? and you've noticed how she has grown?'

'I saw the difference before you were out of the boat,' said Jean. 'Bless her—the bonnie lamb! She's like a rose, and so she has ay been since the day she came into this world. If ever there was a bairn that brought a blessing——'

'You did not tell me when you wrote,' said Isabel, hastily, 'that Mr. John and Ailie had come to Ardnamore.'

Jean had given a perceptible start at the beginning of the sentence, as if she feared to be questioned; but recovered herself as soon as she heard these names. 'I scarcely kent myself,' she said; 'I wouldna believe it till I saw Ailie at the kirk. Eh, she's changed. Me that minds what she was——'

'Does she look—as if she were happy?' said Isabel, feeling her own voice flutter like a sigh through the dark.

'She looks—like a spirit; no like a woman,' said Jean; 'ye should have seen the folk how struck they all were. Some thought she would be giving herself airs noo she's come home to her ain, and some thought she would be currying favour to make folk forget, and some——'

'Oh, never mind what they thought,' said Isabel, 'tell me about herself.'

'Eh, Isabel, you would have been struck! She was as white as a woman cut out of stane, and a' dressed in white, which was awfu' strange to see. She went no to the Ardnamore pew, but to her auld seat, and knelt down at the very prayers when a'budy else was standing. But the strangest of all was the look in her e'en. You would have thought she had never seen one that was there in all her life before.'

'But oh,' cried Isabel, the tears coming to her eyes, 'it was not pride.'

'No, it wasna pride,' said Jean; 'there was some that said it was, but no one that looked at her close like me. I dinna like to say what I thought myself. There's been mad folk in the Ardnamore family for many a generation; but then Ailie's no one of the Ardnamore family except by her marriage, and that wouldna affect her; but——'

'I am going to see her to-morrow,' said Isabel.

'I wouldna if I were you,' said Jean. 'Oh, Isabel, my bonnie woman! I canna bide to see you have any troke with such folk. And there's strangers about the parish I'm no fond of. I heard yesterday of a man that spoke to young Mrs. Diarmid of Ardgartan, and gave her an awfu' fright, and—unless Miss Catherine would take you in her carriage. And you in your deep crape! You canna go and pay visits so early. It wouldna be like you to show so little respect——'

'You have some reason more than this,' said Isabel, growing pale in the darkness, and faltering as she spoke, for her heart began to beat and took away her voice.

'Me! what reason could I have?—but just your good, my lamb!' said Jean, with nervous volubility; 'but I'm no for you mixing yourself up with such folk; and I'm no for you walking about the country-side your lane. There's a heap of Irish about, ay coming with thae weary steamers. You're no to blame me, Isabel, if I am awfu' anxious, more anxious in your condition than if you were a bairn of my own——'

'But I see you have another reason,' said Isabel; 'am I such a bairn or such a fool that you will not tell me? But I am going to see Ailie to-morrow, whatever happens; if you like you can come with me yourself.'

'Na, it's no my place, as if I were Mrs. Lothian's equal,' said Jean, standing irresolute by the table, tracing a pattern on the carpet with her foot. Little Margaret woke at the moment, which was a godsend to her. She had to be patted, and rocked, and sung to, ere she would go to sleep again. Jean escaped under

cover of this interposition; but her face was full of care when she brought in the candles, flashing the light in Baby Margaret's eyes, who immediately opened those dark orbs wide, and made herself very broad awake, and had to be played with for ever so long before she would consent to sleep again. And Isabel was tired, and not to be disturbed with agitating news, and 'put off her night's rest.' Besides, what good would it do to tell her? But Jean's heart was heavy with thoughts of what might be coming, when she bade her stepdaughter good night.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE next day Isabel was too much occupied with her project of visiting Ailie at Ardnamore to be open to any argument or dissuasion. She put aside her stepmother's attempts to move her, with soft obstinacy. 'She was never a friend of yours that you should be so keen about her now,' said Jean.

'She was more to me than you think,' said Isabel; and her stepmother's amazement was great.

'She was liker Margret than you; but far, far different from Margret,' Jean resumed, after a pause; 'and you but a gay heedless lassie, no thinking of such things.'

'But I tell you she was more to me than you thought,' said Isabel.

This was all that Jean could extract from her; and it gave rise to many marvels in the good woman's mind and serious anxiety, which she could not express. 'Eh, if Ailie had anything to do with that English lad,' was the thought that passed through her mind; 'eh, if she should be in league with him now!' But she could not surmount her hesitation about mentioning Stapylton's name.

Isabel had to leave her child behind, which was a novel thing to her, and very strange it felt to walk away alone through the village and down the other side of the Loch towards the steep lane that led to Ardnamore. When she got to the gate, it was the height of the warm languorous afternoon, and the air and the weariness had soothed her, and brought a languorous feeling into her heart. She was not excited about Ailie, poor girl! Isabel, in her own heart, had made out a story for Ailie, setting her down as a neglected, melancholy wife, with a strange past behind her and a mysterious future before, no doubt; and yet not so much lifted beyond the range of ordinary humanity as she had been in the old days.

She expected to be shown into the old-fashioned drawing-room, with its bright windows looking out on the Loch, and to be joined by the mistress of the house, when she had waited a while, and to see Ailie's attempt to look contented, and to bear herself like the other ladies. As she approached the house, the garden and everything around looked so everyday and ordinary, that all that was extraordinary in Ailie's story gradually died out of her visitor's mind. She would be awkward, perhaps, in her new position; she might not even know how to receive Isabel's visit; but, still, no doubt three years of absence and travel had improved her. And Isabel felt more and more as if she were paying an ordinary visit, when the maid, who was just like other maids, let her into the house, which was precisely like other houses. The deerskin mats at the door, the antlers in the hall, the hats and plaids hanging about, each took something from her interest. She began to forget Ailie, and think only of Mrs. Diarmid of Ardnamore.

The drawing-room was a large, light room, rather low in the roof, furnished with old-fashioned spindle-legged furniture, gilt and painted, and covered with white covers, to preserve the fading damask below. Isabel went in with a little gentle curiosity, seeing no one. She moved a few steps into the room, her eye catching the Indian inlaid work of a set of writing things upon a table, but not perceiving in the whiteness of the room a white figure seated just within the curtains at the bay window, half hidden in the recess. Even when she did perceive her, Isabel stood uncertain, hesitating whether to go forward or to wait quietly apart till Ailie should make her appearance. For surely this was not Ailie—it must be some visitor, some caller—— But a strange sense of recognition stole over her after the first start. She stood in her intense blackness and gazed at the unknown being whose appearance was such a contrast to her own; and then there came at last a faint sound of a voice: 'Is it you, Isabel?'

'Oh, is it you, Ailie?' she cried, and went up to her with something of her old impetuous manner. Yes, it was Ailie, and yet as unlike Ailie as fancy could have imagined. She was sitting against the wall with no appearance of any occupation—her listless hands lying in her lap. She was dressed in dead white, not light muslin, but opaque white stuff, loosely made, or else hanging loosely upon her worn figure. Her face was almost as white as her gown, her blue eyes were dilated and wandering, her fair hair, which once had so much pale gold in it, had lost its lustre. She was like marble, but yet she was not like death. Something of move-

ment, a thrill of wavering agitation and life, was about her, although she sat as still as if, like the Lady in 'Comus,' she had been bound by enchantment into her chair.

'I did not see you when I came in,' said Isabel. 'I only heard of it yesterday; and so you've come home?'

'Aye—I've come home.'

'And you've seen your own people again after all,' said Isabel, trying to adopt a tone of congratulation.

'Aye—I've seen my own folk.'

'And I am very glad you are back,' said Isabel, 'home is the best. But I never heard till yesterday, when I came back too. How glad they would all be! And I hope you were glad too—I hope you were pleased yourself?'

Ailie made no answer. She turned her head half away, and gazed again over the Loch. A little almost imperceptible nod of her head was the only indication she gave of having heard. And Isabel began to grow nervous in spite of herself.

'Will you not speak to me, Ailie? are you not pleased to see me? I thought you would be pleased—and I would not lose a day. And you must have heard,' said Isabel, a little affronted as well as amazed at the indifference shown her, and instinctively producing her highest claim to consideration, 'what dreadful trouble I have had since you went away.'

The word seemed to catch Ailie's ear without any that followed or preceded it. 'Trouble!' she said vaguely, 'what can your trouble be in comparison with mine?'

'Oh, I beg your pardon,' cried Isabel, with violent youthful compunction, 'you know I have heard nothing. Oh, Ailie, don't sit there and look so sad—tell me about it—was it your child?'

Ailie turned upon her her great wandering, dilated eyes: 'My child?'

'I did not know,' said Isabel, almost crying, 'I thought you might have lost—a child—when you said your trouble was worse than mine.'

'My trouble is worse than any trouble on earth,' said Ailie; 'and oh to come back here to look on the same place night and day as I knew in my dreams. I think my heart will burst—it's broken long, long ago,' she added, turning away from Isabel, with a sudden pathos in her voice. It seemed a confession of unhappiness so open and undisguised, that Isabel was driven to her wits' end, not knowing what to do or say.

'Oh, Ailie!' she said—'oh, Ailie, you should not say that now—I told you, you should not marry him——'

'Marry him!' said Ailie, with a faint wonder stealing

over her face. 'We are meaning different things, you and me. Aye—I though I was wedded to the Lord; I thought He was sending me forth to do His will. Oh, woman! what is your bairn or your man to that? And it was not that I deceived myself,' she continued, rising into vehemence; 'I never deceived myself. There was His promise, clear as the sun in the skies. Could I no see all the wonders of the latter days? I saw them in myself; I spoke in power; I rose up off my bed that might have been my dying bed—and a' to be betrayed, and casten down, and deceived!'

'Oh, Ailie,' cried Isabel, wringing her hands, 'what are you speaking of—what do you mean?'

For the moment Ailie made no answer. She never turned her head to one side or the other—but gazed before her into the air, seeing nothing. 'Your Margret was right,' she said, after a pause. 'It's sweetest to die—oh, it's fine to die. Christ died, Isabel. We say it's for us you know, and so it is for us, but He had to do it. Nae miracle saved Him; that's what your Margret said.'

'But He saved you,' said Isabel, in her awe, under her breath.

At these words Ailie burst into a few sudden, violent tears—a momentary paroxysm which she seemed totally incapable of controlling. 'Whiles I think it was some devil,' she said.

'Oh, Ailie,' cried Isabel, 'this is not you that is speaking—not you that was always so good!'

'That is another thing,' said Ailie, without any apparent sense of reproof, 'whiles that is what I think; that it's no me, but some ill spirit in me. And though I think I'm sitting here, I may be with your Margret in Heaven, throwing my gold crown before His feet. Oh, if it was but that! Sometimes at night the Lord sends such thoughts like dew—if it is the Lord. But then comes the awfu' morning, Isabel Diarmid, and I open my eyes, and my heart cries out—He has broken His word.'

'Ailie! Ailie!'

'Oh, dinna speak! He has broken His word. I gave up all for it—all! I thought first I was to serve Him my own way, a single lass. But, Isabel, you mind? I wouldna maintain my way in the face of His word. I gave up all! And he wiled me out to the world with false hopes. And He's broken His own word. He's done nought—nought—nought, that He said!'

'Are ye speaking of Mr. John?' said Isabel, driven to her wits' end. 'Oh, Ailie, is it him you mean?'

'I mean the Lord,' said Ailie, folding her hands together, and pressing them to her breast.

And then there was a pause. Isabel, to whom this sounded like blasphemy, drew a step or two apart, full of agitation and alarm. But Ailie was not excited. She did not even change her attitude, but sat still with her eyes vaguely fixed on the world without, and the Loch which lay so bright in the sunshine. She gazed, but she saw nothing—her mind's eye was turned inward; and to the young creature full of life, and all its movements, who stood by her, this abstracted woman was a marvel past all comprehension. Was she unhappy in her home? was it in the want of love that had frozen her? was it grief or loss, or some bereavement of which Isabel knew nothing? She broke the silence at last with timid inquiries, which sounded like a prayer.

'But, Ailie,' she asked, faltering at every word, 'you have had no grief—in your life? You have still your husband? There has been no—death—nor—trouble? You've been—happy?—as much as folk are in this world?'

'Happy!' It did not sound like an answer, but only like an echo of the other voice, and another pause followed. 'It was God's will I sought and nothing else,' she said at last. 'Was it me to think of marrying or giving in marriage? It was my meat and my drink to do His will. Oh, Isabel Diarmid! it's your man and your bairn you think of—but no me. What I was thinking on was a world lying in darkness—a' bonnie and bright outside—like *that*—and a' miserable and perishing within—and He promised He would mend it a'. Go forth and preach, He said, and I'll come again and the holy angels, and bring in a new Heaven and a new earth. And there was the word in my ain mouth for a testimony. What was I that I should speak in power if it hadna been Him that did it?—and now all my hope is gone. The Lord Himself has broken His word. What do I care if the earth should tumble to pieces this moment! The minister is but dead, Isabel, and you'll find him in Heaven; but I'm disappointed in my God,' cried Ailie, suddenly hiding her face in her hands; 'and Him I'll never find again, neither in Heaven nor earth.'

This tragical outcry was so bitter and full of anguish, that Isabel stopped short in the protestations that rose to her lips. And yet the very thought of thus reproaching God made her tremble, as if it must bring down fire from Heaven. 'Oh, Ailie,' she faltered, 'it is not for me to teach you; but oh, I dare not stand and hear you judging God!'

A low moan came from Ailie's breast. She shook her head sadly. Her great eyes turned to Isabel's for a moment with the anguish of a dumb creature in pain.

She was far beyond tears. 'There's nae power nor voice in me now,' she said, 'to teach or to speak. He's taken His gifts away, as well as the hope. I canna burst out and cry, "Oh, why tarry the wheels of His chariot?" It's all gone—all gone! spirit, and power, and life, and hope!'

Isabel was too much bewildered and overwhelmed to reply. 'Oh, Ailie, have you no child?' she cried, at last finding no other words that would come.

She had but asked the question, when the door opened, and Mr. John came suddenly in. When he saw Isabel he paused, and the same softened look which had come over his face in the steamer at the sight of her again gleamed over it.

'You have come to see her?' he said, and looked from the young widow in her deep mourning to his marble-white wife in her snowy cold dress with the strangest look of comparison. It seemed to the man as if the fate that might have been his and that which was really his thus stood together in visible contact. Isabel had grown more and more like her sister without knowing it. And now when her heart was so touched with sorrow, and wonder, and compassion, and all the depths of her nature moving in her eyes, it might have been Margaret herself who stood there, looking with infinite pity, striving vainly to understand the woman who was John Diarmid's wife.

'She is changed,' he said, following with his eyes Isabel's anxious look—'sadly changed. It is because she will look at things only in one way. We were mistaken, I think. The world itself is changed, though so few can see it. It is not by converting a single soul here and there, but by moving nations that God's work is to be done. Ailie, I am going away.'

'Going: where to?' she said, with a momentary glance into his face; 'to take the sword like them that shall perish by the sword? That's no His command. I'm a poor creature—a miserable creature—He's cast me off, and broken His word to me; but I'll no forsake Him. No; there's no word of power put into my mouth to speak to you, John Diarmid, not any word of power, but them that take the sword shall perish by the sword. He said it with His own lips.'

'Amen!' said Mr. John; 'it matters little. What is life to you or me that I should care to preserve it? As long as there is a race oppressed, so long is God's word hindered in this world. I must go to my work—the time of patience and quiet is past.'

'Oh, Mr. John!' cried Isabel, 'you will never go and leave her alone like this?'

He turned to her with once more that softened look. 'Perhaps I would not,' he said, 'if I could do her good. But no, Isabel. We have wrenched ourselves out of the common soil, she and I, and we cannot take root again. I must go to do what's left me to do. We were fools, and took God at His word, without thinking that the paths must be made straight and the rough places smooth. I must go and work as I can—and she—will die.'

He said this so low that Isabel hoped she alone heard it; and she could not restrain a cry of wonder, and horror, and protestation.

'Aye!' said Ailie from her window, 'I will die, if I can. Oh, how easy it will be now, and sweet! When I think how I vexed Margret—and now she's in the secret, and knows all; and I'm fighting with my own heart, and cast off by my God. John Diarmid, maybe I'll be gone before you come back.'

'I would not hinder you, Ailie!' he said, going up to her with sudden emotion and taking her listless white hands into his. 'No, though you will reproach me before God, I would not keep you back—now when things have come so far, that is best.'

'Yes,' she said, 'it's best. All's gone from me—all's gone! I'm of no use but to die. They say when the seed dies in the ground—— Oh, John Diarmid! if you'll grant it was a lying spirit, and no a word from the Lord, I think I could die content.'

He did not make any answer, but stood before her holding her hands, gazing down with a certain anguish upon the white face from which all the tints of life had altogether died away.

'Here's Isabel,' she went on, now for the first time rousing from her blank contemplation of the world around, and fixing her eyes on his face, '*her* sister. It is as if it were Margret come herself, out of Heaven, out of her grave, to hear you. John Diarmid, it was never love for me, I know. Will you tell me again before *her*; was it the word of the Lord you brought me yon night, and no just the madness in your heart?'

Still he made her no answer, but stood and held her shadowy hand and gazed down into her face.

'He said I was to wed him, Isabel, for it was the word of the Lord,' cried Ailie, rising into excitement. 'If he'll answer me this I want no more on earth. If it was but his madness, and no the word of the Spirit, then I could lie down at my Lord's feet and say we've sinned. Oh, can you no see the difference? Say we've sinned, it's easy, easy! But say thou hast tempted me and made me fall; it's bitterer than death.'

Isabel, with the tears streaming down her cheek, drew near at this passionate appeal. She did not understand what it meant, nor what she was called upon to do. But her mediation was asked for, and she answered the call by instinct. She laid her hand upon Mr. John's arm and looked up with beseeching eyes in his face. 'Oh, if you can ease her mind!' cried Isabel, not knowing what she asked.

'Would you have me say I had spoken a lie in the Lord's name?' he cried, and let his wife's hands fall, turning away from them with the old fiery glow blazing up in his eyes.

Then at once, and as by a spell, Ailie fell into the stillness and apathy from which she had been momentarily roused. Her husband turned away and went to another window to read his letters, leaving her relapsed into her old attitude, her hands again crossed in her lap, her eyes gazing out upon the bright, unvarying landscape. Isabel stood by her almost as motionless as she, looking at her with an anxiety which seemed to deprive her of all power of speech. What could she say? What was there in Heaven or earth that could comfort this forlorn creature? How hopeless she looked, abstracted from all the life that surrounded her! Mr. John returned to them before Isabel could find a word to say. He went forward to his wife and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

'Farewell, Ailie,' he said; 'if I should, as you say, perish by the sword, this will be the end of all between us—and, perhaps, it would be best for you.'

'Farewell,' she said, dreamily; 'farewell!' It seemed at first as if she was about to let him go without even a look. But at last a little stir of life moved her. 'We've been no blessing to each other,' she said; 'neither you to me, nor I to you. And my heart's dead and the Spirit gone from me; but you were never an ill man to me, John Diarmid. It's right Isabel should know. The will o' the Lord—if it was the will o' the Lord—hasna been blessed to you or to me. But you were never ill to me; you would have been good to me if—'

'If——' said Mr. John. 'We will enter into that subject no more. But farewell, Ailie. I think we will never meet in this world again.' Then he turned to Isabel and took both her hands into his. 'I do not care for my life,' he said, 'no more than she does. It is for God's service to do what He likes with. But so long as she lives will you be good to her? Neither for her sake nor mine, but for——'

'O, hush!' cried Isabel, 'there should be no other name spoken of here. Why should you go away? Ailie,

you are his wife, tell him to stay. And you are not old that you should part. Oh, Mr. John, look at me! Is it well to be alone in the world at my age, and at her age? Stay and take care of her yourself. She is your wife. Ailie, take his hand and make him stay!’

She stood impetuous between the two, holding a hand of each, trying, with her young energy, to draw the sombre, passionate, disappointed man and the abstracted, visionary wife to each other.

‘God will not bless you if you part,’ cried Isabel. ‘Oh, look at me that am a widow! What would I give to have my good man to be my help and protection? Ailie, speak to him, and he will stay.’

Mr. John was the first to free himself from her hand.

‘I cannot stay,’ he said, ‘not even if she wanted me as much as now she wants to be free of me. I have my use in the world, though not the use I once thought. Farewell! the chances are I will never see Loch Diarmid again.’

‘Is he gone?’ cried Isabel. ‘Oh, Ailie, look out after him, or kiss your hand to him. Oh, give him one look before he goes, as if you were a living woman, and no made of stone!’

And in her horror she rushed herself into the recess of the window, and waved her hand to him as he went away. Mr. John turned round before the door of his father’s house, which he was leaving, as he believed for ever. A strange smile came over his face. The woman whom in his madness he had compelled to marry him was there like a white vision, making no sign. But the other tearful face, full of emotion, was turned towards him; and Isabel, who had almost hated him for half her life, waved her hand in the compunction of her mind. ‘My Margaret!’ he said, softly to himself; and thus turned and disappeared out of the quiet world in which he was unfit to live.

‘He is gone! Oh, Ailie, he is gone!’ said Isabel, coming back from the window with a sob.

‘Aye, he’s gone!’ said Ailie; ‘and you are more moved than his wife. I know what you would say, Isabel, but it’s useless—useless! What is man to me? All that I ever was, all that I wanted, was to be the handmaid of the Lord.’

‘But you are married to *him*!’ cried Isabel; ‘you are his wife; you should go with him, or he should stay with you. Oh, Ailie, if it is not too late——!’

‘There’s nae marrying, nor giving in marriage in Heaven,’ said Ailie. ‘If there is a Heaven—if it’s no just a delusion like the rest. But what can I do? I’m willing to come to an end, and be done with all manner

of life, if that's the Lord's will. Asking and praying and wishing for one thing more than another has gone clean out of my heart.'

'And you have not a thought for him, the moment he has said farewell to you—not a tear. Oh, Ailie!' cried Isabel, in her impetuosity, 'are you made of stone?'

'My heart's dead,' she said; and then relapsed into silence, which the hasty, eager creature beside her could not break.

To leave her thus in her apathy seemed impossible to Isabel, and it was equally impossible to stay and devote herself to Ailie's solace, for Ailie did not seem susceptible of any solace. She was lost in her own thoughts. Before Isabel's heart had ceased to throb with agitation and excitement, Ailie had settled back into the profoundest stillness, saying nothing to her visitor, taking no notice even of her presence. And there was nothing left for it but to leave her to herself—to the silence she preferred.

Isabel had just made up her mind to do this when the door opened again, this time with more sound and commotion, and Ailie's mother entered the room. She came forward briskly, bringing the ordinary out-of-door life into the mysterious atmosphere, though a certain appearance of anxiety about her eyes betrayed that even Janet was disturbed by a state of affairs so much different from her hopes.

'Eh, Mrs. Lothian, I'm glad to see you,' she said, 'but will you no sit down? My daughter is so taken up about parting with Ardnamore that she's no as thoughtful as she should be. Ailie, my dear, I hope you've thanked Mrs. Lothian for coming to see you. It's a real attention, and her no in the way of visiting; but you were ay friends. Will you no sit down?'

'I am going away,' said Isabel, with a little dignity. 'I have been here a long time. If there is anything I can do for Ailie, or anything Miss Catherine can do, if you will let us know——'

'Miss Catherine, no doubt, will come and see her,' said Janet; 'she's her ain relation. Na, there's nothing anybody can do. She's in her ain house, and a pleasant house it is. But Mrs. Diarmid will ay be glad to see her friends. You see she's taken up just at this moment with her husband going away,' said the dauntless old woman, confronting Isabel bravely, with a look which defied criticism. Isabel, however, had been too much moved by the interview to have any regard for appearances. She turned round upon the watchful mother as soon as the door of the room closed upon them.

'Oh, tell me,' she said, 'has she been long like this?'

Is she always like this? Is there nothing that can be done?’

‘Like what, Mistress Lothian?’ said the old woman, looking direct into Isabel’s eyes.

And then there was a dead pause. Janet’s forehead had a contraction in it which only anxiety could have made so distinctly visible among the native wrinkles. The ruddy old cheek was blanched out of its usual wholesome wintry colour; but she stood by the door of the room in which her daughter sat, like a sentinel, and defied the world.

‘I mean—oh, how can you ask me?—who can see her, and not feel their hearts break?’ cried Isabel. ‘Will it always be like this?’

‘I dinna take your meaning,’ said Janet, grimly. ‘Ardnamore’s away on business, and Mrs. Diarmid is, maybe, no so cheerful as she might be. And I wouldna say but she’s a wee tired with her journey. I think ye never were abroad? It’s more fashious than just going to London. And when ye’ve been travelling like that, day and night, ye want rest.’

Isabel’s innocent mind was confused by this view of the matter. ‘Then, do you think, after all, that she’s not unhappy?’ she asked.

‘Unhappy!’ cried the old woman, ‘and her a good man, and a comfortable house, and well thought on, and everything that heart could desire!’

She had raised her voice, and the words seemed to ring through the mysterious, silent house. Isabel, who was too inexperienced to avoid yielding a bewildered assent to any strenuous assertion, was so moved by this that she went away wondering, asking herself whether she could be mistaken. But as soon as the door had closed upon her poor Janet’s strength broke down. She threw her apron over her head, and leaned against the wall, silent yet convulsed by a momentary struggle. ‘But I’ll never let on to the world,’ the old woman said to herself, as she came out from under that veil with a fiery sparkle in her worn, old eyes. Poor Ailie had at least one defender ready to stand by her to the death.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ISABEL went out again on her way home with a mingled feeling of relief and bewilderment. She was not nourishing one single thought of herself or her own affairs as she threaded the winding way; and perhaps it was for this reason that the sight of the figure, advancing

to meet her as she turned the corner, came upon her with such startling suddenness. Two steps brought her from the solitude of the road immediately in front of him, and these two steps marked the immensely greater revulsion from unselfish solicitude for another to the sudden wild return of her own life into her passive soul, which seemed no actor, but only a spectator of the change. She came round the corner lightly and swiftly with dreaming eyes, looking into the air, which was vacant of everything but the trees and the reflections of sky and water, and all the sweetness of the time—and suddenly looked full into the face of Horace Stapylton, so near to her that he seemed to have sprung from some hiding-place, or dropped from the sky! Had there been even a minute's interval to prepare her for his appearance, it would have been different. But he came upon her all at once without even a sound of his step on the mossy, grassy path. She stood still and gave a low cry. Her heart gave a leap as to her lips. A sudden colour rushed over her face, and with a pang as sudden, the sense of having betrayed herself rushed after the first thrill of emotion into her heart.

'Isabel!' he said, making one rapid step towards her, and taking her hand in his. He would never have ventured to do it, but for her self-betrayal. He had not been taken by surprise. He gazed at her with eyes that shone and glowed with unconcealed feeling. Isabel grew as suddenly pale as she felt the warm pressure of his hand. She drew herself away, and stepped aside, and made him a little formal bow.

'I beg your pardon,' she said, 'Mr. Stapylton; I did not know you were there. It was—the surprise——'

'And then when you recollect, and get over the surprise, you drive me away,' he said, looking as he had looked in the old days, when he had a lover's right to her attention, and dared complain and quarrel with her. 'Why should you drive me away? Why may we not be friends?'

'Mr. Stapylton, you mistake,' she said, with confusion; 'I was not thinking—there is no reason. I was startled to see you—I mean, to see anyone. The road is so lonely here.'

'There was a time,' he said, turning with her as she made a movement to go on—'there was a time when it would have been no surprise to you to meet me anywhere, wherever I knew you to be.'

'But times change,' she said, breathlessly, and then, with eagerness to change the subject, made the best plunge she could into general conversation. 'I have been seeing Mrs. Diarmid, at Ardnamore.'

'That was Ailie; was it not?'

'Yes, it was Ailie,' she said, regaining a little courage. 'She married Mr. John. Not caring for him, perhaps—that is—I mean—not at first.'

'People do such things,' he said, not looking at her, 'every day.'

'And she has come back,' said Isabel, who was too much agitated to think that he meant to launch any passing arrow at herself, 'and I do not understand what ails her. She is no longer a prophet; but that is not all. She sits and never looks at you, never speaks; and she says God has deceived her; and her husband has gone away.'

'They must be a strange couple,' said Stapylton, bringing that subject to a sudden close. Perhaps it was her evident agitation, the tremor with which she recognised him in her surprise, that made him so bold; but he was impatient, it was clear, of ordinary conversation. 'I can't call you by your new name,' he said, suddenly. 'When I saw you the other day, with that old woman by your side—and that—child—in your arms——'

'Mr. Stapylton, you are not to speak to me so!'

'When I saw you,' he repeated, with a certain hurry and sweep of passion, which she could not stand against, 'it shook me like an earthquake. Yes, Isabel—I have been like you, trying not to think. Don't try now to make me believe you are quite calm talking of other things. You can't forget three years ago—I know you don't forget——'

'I have nothing to be ashamed of—in—three years ago,' said Isabel, trembling, and with all the colour rushing to her face.

'And I have,' he said. 'Ah, I acknowledge that; I would confess it on my knees if you would listen. Ashamed—bitterly ashamed! To think of all that might have been prevented—all the harm that might have been spared—if I had not been such a coward and a fool.'

There was self-reproach in his voice; and Isabel felt a tender compunction seize her, felt her strength stolen from her. If going away from her had made him desperate, should not she be the first to forgive?

'Indeed I do not blame you,' she said softly; 'it has turned out—for the best.'

'For the best!' he cried passionately; 'at least, you cannot expect me to grant that. Your very dress which you wear for *him*—your very name—everything—how can I stand here and look at you and bear it—I who never changed in my heart?'

'Mr. Stapylton,' said Isabel, 'you have nothing to do

with me now. You are a stranger, and we were not speaking of your heart. That has nothing—nothing to do with me. I must go home to my baby. I beg of you not to come any further, but to let me go.'

'Isabel,' he said, 'look at me, don't turn your eyes away from me: I am not a stranger; you could not make me so were you ever so cruel; the time will never be when we shall have nothing to do with each other, you and I—only look at me! What reason can there be why we should part now?'

'Oh, Mr. Stapylton, let me go,' she said, shrinking aside from him, not venturing to raise her eyes. She dared not look at him as he begged her to do. She knew that her eyes would have betrayed her—that the beating in her temples and the throbbing in her ears would have found some expression in every look she could turn upon him. Never for all these years had her heart beat as it was beating now. She had been a wife and a widow and a mother, and yet the sound of Horace Stapylton's voice moved her more deeply than all the events of her own life had done. She hated herself for it, but yet it was so. Her heart went out to him past all her power of restraint. And though her face flushed with bitter shame, and her heart ached with self-reproach, yet she could not help it. The only safeguard she had was in flight. 'Let me go,' she repeated, keeping her eyes on the ground, and keeping as far apart from him as the narrow path would permit.

'Yes, if you hate me altogether,' he said, with vehemence. 'If you do, I might have spared myself—much, very much, that can't be undone. If you hate me, I will let you go!'

The sound of his voice went to her heart. She was free to pass, yet she could not refrain from one glance at him. He was trembling; his face was as pale as death, and drawn together with tragic force of passion. And Isabel could not bear this dreadful expression on the face of the man she had once loved.

'Oh, it is not that I hate you!' she cried, out of the depths of her heart.

'Then you love me!' he said, wildly seizing her hand. 'Between us there can be no alternative. Oh, Isabel, I have bought you dear! Never send me away again.'

'Oh, let me go!' she repeated, with such a struggle going on within as her whole past life had not experienced. She, Mr. Lothian's wife, to stand here with a man—any man, be he whom he might, kissing her hand! She, little Margaret's mother! She could not bear it. She snatched her hand from him, and covered her face with it, and sank down on the grassy bank where

she stood. What else could she do but weep her heart out, words being impossible? She could say no more; she could not dare to look at him again. The struggle had come to such a point that there was nothing left for her but the unspeakable utterance of tears.

And she was grateful to him that he took no advantage of her weakness. He did not even take her hand again, or take her into his arms as he might have done, but stood looking at her, with something she did not understand in his eyes. How it was she saw the look in his face, through her passionate tears, she herself could not have explained. But she was conscious of it, and of a certain compassion and awe mingled in the eagerness of his gaze, which kept him standing apart, with a delicacy which had never appeared in him before.

'Isabel,' he said, hoarsely; 'though you are cruel to me, I will not be hard upon you. I love you the same as ever—and you love me; all that has come between us is past. Don't let us so much as speak of that—it is all over, my darling; there is no obstacle between us now. No, I will not press you further. I would not vex you for all the world. I will come to you to the old place or to your own house, my dear, if that is better. And after all it has cost us, Isabel—oh, Isabel! may we not be happy at last?'

'Horace, let me be!' she cried, rising to her feet and holding out her hands to him as with an appeal for mercy.

'I can never let you be,' he cried, seizing her hands and putting down his face upon them for one moment. She felt that his eyes were wet and his lips dry and quivering, and their positions seemed reversed all at once—and it was she who yearned over him, longing to console him and give some comfort to his heart.

'Oh, Horace,' she said, 'you are going away—you said you were going away? and you'll forget. I could not live if I thought it grieved you and made your heart sore. You'll go away, and you'll think on me no more! Why should we be so sorry? It has not been appointed that you and me should be together. Bid me farewell; and, oh, go away and mind me no more. But I'll think of you every night when I say my prayers.'

His answer was such a groan as made her start and shrink; and then he raised a pale, passionate face to her, and drew her to him, holding both her hands.

'You are to be my wife, Isabel!' he said.

'No: oh, no. I am *his* wife,' she said, with a cry half of terror; 'and my child—my child!'

'Was it my fault he took you from me?' he cried. 'I was absent and did not know. Your child shall be mine,

Isabel; and you are mine—say you are mine! We can never more part again.'

'Oh, Horace! let me go.'

It was the sound of a step on the road which interrupted this strange struggle. He let her hands fall as this sound, and that of a cheerful rural voice singing some homely ditty, fell suddenly into those exclamations of passion, and stopped them as by a spell. When Helen, the 'lass' from Ardnamore, came down the road she saw, at first without surprise, Mrs. Lothian walking down before her, with a 'strange gentleman' by her side—'ane of thae English,' Helen said to herself, reflecting that the young widow had been in London, and consequently might be supposed to be acquainted with that nation in general. Helen's after reflections, when she came to put this and that together, were of a different character, but for the moment she was not suspicious. She passed them with the ordinary salutation, 'It's a fine day,' taking no note of the tearful dilation of Isabel's eyes; and, all unconsciously to herself, was Isabel's guardian and protector. It was like the Stapylton of old that he should have fallen into a moody silence after this interruption. And he left Isabel when they reached the highroad. 'I will see you again,' was all he said. To see them thus parting, taking different directions, no one would have thought what a contest of wills had just taken place between them, nor with what an agitated soul Isabel turned along the sunny way by the Loch side, to the home which had once been so still and quiet, where her baby awaited her, and her tranquil, pensive, unexciting life remained waiting to be taken up again as soon as she should return.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

JEAN was looking out in the opposite direction, somewhat anxious for her stepdaughter's return. She was standing at the cottage-door with Baby Margaret in her arms, straining her eyes along the vacant road, and full of anxiety. She gave a suppressed scream when Isabel came noiselessly up behind her, and, without saying a word, clutched at the child and took it out of her arm.

'God bless us, I thought it was a ghost!' she cried. 'Oh, Isabel, you're like death. It's been more than you can bear.'

'I am tired,' said Isabel, holding her child close with a vehemence which terrified the little creature; and as she looked at her stepmother, the pallor gave way to a

sudden, overpowering flush. Her eyes fell before the good woman's anxious, searching look. She turned away, still holding her child strained to her heart. She could not trust herself to meet Jean's eyes, or even her baby's. Could she ever venture to look anyone in the face again?

'It's a long walk,' said Jean, anxiously, following her in, 'and you've come the long way round by the braes; and it's been too much for you. Oh, Isabel, my bonnie woman! it's brought everything back to your mind.'

'It did not need the sight of Ailie to do that,' said Isabel, scarcely knowing what she said. 'Do things ever go out of one's mind?'

And she held her child closer than ever, and hid her face in Margaret's frock. It did not occur to her that she was betraying herself even by the passionate strain of that embrace. Jean gazed at her alarmed, noting every change in her face, the sudden flush and pallor, the inward-looking eyes, the reluctance to meet her own affectionate, anxious gaze.

'Was she awfu' changed?' she asked.

'Changed—whom?' said Isabel, with a little start. She had scarcely uttered the words when she recollected herself. Ailie had been driven entirely out of her mind by the after event; the scene which had made so deep an impression on her before she met Stapylton was half effaced from her very recollection. It rose upon her dimly as she tried to remember. 'Oh, yes, very much changed,' she said, and stopped short, unable to revive her own interest in a matter so faint and far away.

'Do you think she's happy?' asked Jean.

Strange to think anyone could be so inquisitive! Why should she be forced to pause and recall an experience so distant? 'I don't know,' said Isabel; 'how can anybody tell? People are happy sometimes when they ought not to be happy, and miserable when they have no reason to be miserable. Am I the judge?—or how can I tell?'

'But dear me, Isabel, you were awfu' anxious about her,' cried Jean, affronted; 'and would give nobody any peace till ye had been to see her. And now it seems ye dinna care.'

'Oh, yes, I care; if you would let me rest and be quiet, and not ask me anything now!'

Half offended, wondering, and disturbed, Jean looked at the speaker. It was very clear that Ailie had but little to do with Isabel's excitement. This sudden irritation and impatience reminded her of the old times before her stepdaughter had been subdued by the events of life, or had learned to control herself. Mrs. Lothian had not been guilty of those movements of temper and impetuous

feeling which were so lively in Isabel Diarmid. Was it that some other subtle change had come, setting at nought the work of experience, and bringing back the original natural condition of the girl's restless, vivacious soul? Jean did not ask herself so elaborate a question, but the substance of it was in her mind. She said no more, but went softly about the room, putting in order things which needed no arrangement, and watching secretly her stepdaughter's looks. Isabel took no notice of what she was doing. As soon as she was left to herself she relieved Baby Margaret from the close strain against her breast which had terrified the child, and began to kiss her passionately and pour forth over her inarticulate murmurs of tenderness. Such an outburst of compunctious caresses was as significant as the other strange appearances in her. 'As if she had done the innocent bairn some harm,' Jean said to herself. And what could it mean? Isabel would not let no hand but her own touch her child during the remainder of the day. She made no further comment upon her visit to Ardnamore, but occupied herself wholly with little Margaret, talking to her, caressing her, controlling her baby will—having even, for the first time in her life, a little struggle and contest with the child, who perhaps felt by instinct the state of excitement in which its mother was. Jean looked on without interfering, with curious, grave scrutiny and alarm. When the infant was naughty, and cried, and struggled, she kept behind not to put herself in the way. But many speculations were in her mind, and some of them not far from the truth.

Jean had taken fright, though she could not herself have told why. For one thing, she was aware of Stapylton's presence in the parish, and thought of him as of a prowling enemy. But it was difficult for her to associate Isabel's strange abstractions, her passionate devotion to her child, and all the signs of suppressed agitation about her, with the reappearance of her former lover. Jean had passed the period at which people realise vividly such conflicts of the heart. It seemed to her more likely that Isabel's calm had been disturbed by all the recollections which the sight of Ailie must have brought to her, than that Mr. Lothian's widow could have been agitated or excited by the appearance of any man under the sun. 'Yon English lad' had never been good enough for 'our Isabel' in her stepmother's eyes; and that she could think of him now seemed well-nigh impossible. But yet something was wrong; and as soon as Isabel had left the house, Jean sent her son on an errand across the braes to the Dominie to beg his help and counsel. Jamie was too late to find 'the Maister.'

He had gone out on one of the long walks with which, now summer had come, he endeavoured to make up to himself for the want of his friend and companion. But, notwithstanding the failure of this messenger, Mr. Galbraith heard the news more distinctly than Jean could have informed him, or than she herself knew. The smithy was still open when he returned home in the twilight, and had as usual a little band collected in it of men, observers upon humanity and critics of its wondrous ways. John Macwhirter himself, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, was in front of the group, doing nothing, for it was warm, and it was near even his time for closing. He was rubbing his great hands together, looking meditatively into the summer air; but the observation that fell from his lips was not an original one. 'Women are queer beings,' was all that he said.

'I see nothing queer in it, for my part,' said Peter Chalmers. 'He was well known to be after Isabel afore ever she married the minister; and now he's come back——'

'Who are ye speaking of, I would like to know?' the Dominie said, who had entered listlessly, and whom these words had excited in spite of himself.

'There was nae offence meant,' said Peter. 'I ca' her but as a' the country-side ca'ed her afore she married the minister. And it was nae secret that ever I heard tell of. I've seen them thegither on the braes and on the road. It was kept quiet, I've ay heard, out of consideration for Margret, who couldna bide the lad. And syne when Margret died he was sent for hame—and out o' sight out o' mind is the way of the world. But now that she's free, and he's come back, ye canna crush nature. If they come thegither again, as is to be expected, what's that to you or me?'

'Again, I ask, who are ye speaking of?' said Mr. Galbraith with grim emphasis.

'Na, na, maister, there's nae call to be angry,' said John Macwhirter; 'he's a nasty cynical body, but this time it's true. Naebody thought mair of the auld minister than me—this one could never hold the candle to him; but he wasna just the man for a young lass. And she's but young for a' that's come and gane; and her lad's come back——'

'How dare ye say such a word?' cried the Dominie, enraged. 'Eh, men, you're no worthy to be called men, if a lassie like that, made a widow as she was, gets no reverence from ye! Poor bit gentle thing! her only protector gone, and nothing but an infant between her and despair ye may say. I wonder ye don't think shame?'

'That's a' true, a' true,' said the smith; 'but I ay stick up for justice. If Mrs. Lothian should be glad to see the lad she once likit, is that ony sin? Naebody was blaming her. No, no, maister, ye mustna go beyond nature. He was a good man and a clever man; but ye're no so simple as to think that a bonnie young lass should be bound a' her life because she was his wife for a year! Would that be reasonable? I'm no taking one side or another, but as Peter says, "What's the harm?"'

'I ask ye what's the evidence! which is more to the purpose?' said the Dominie.

'Weel, nae doubt it's a slender foundation to build so much on,' said John. 'She's been at Ardnamore the day, and she met him on the road. That's all about it—nothing ye may say, but casting a seed into the ground. Eelin, the lass at Ardnamore, saw them talking, and she came on and tellt the wives; and the wives they've a' made up their minds how it's to be—ye canna stop the tongues of a wheen women. And I canna say it's anything but natural if ye ask me mysel.'

'It would be hard to tell in what ye're better than the women, making a work about such childish clavers,' said Mr. Galbraith with disdain.

'Well we're mair philosophical,' said the smith; 'they're a' at her like hens at a grosset, and no a civil word in their heads. I'm an awfu' man for justice mysel. A young lass is but a young lass if she was a widow twenty times over, and nae doubt before he did such a foolish thing the minister counted the cost, and kent weel that his young widow would wed some other man. Lord bless us it's human nature! She's no five-and-twenty yet. She's no an auld wife to be content with her wean? It's nature, just nature! I'm neither blaming her nor him.'

'I advise you to say no more about it, philosophical or no,' said the Dominie; 'there are lads and lasses enough in the parish without bringing in them that are out of your way. I say nothing for the rest—but, John Macwhirter, there are inklings of understanding about you, and I looked for better at your hand.'

'I've said nae ill I ken of,' said the smith, half sullen, half abashed. 'A woman is but a woman if she was a queen. No but what I have a great respect for Mrs. Lothian,' he added, with some embarrassment. 'Lord, Peter, if ye say another word, as sure as death ye shall hae a taste of the Loch, to put ye in mind wha ye are.'

'I'm no conscious I ever forgot who I was,' said Peter, with a laugh, 'nor other folk. Respect be to a' where respect is due; but as ye were saying, John, lads and lasses are ay the same, be it in a cot or in a palace. The Maister himsel canna contradict that.'

'I'm saying nothing about your lads and lasses,' said the Dominie, severely; 'but, lads, ye can have little feeling in your minds, and ye've forgotten every lesson ye ever got from me, if ye cannot respect the very name of a woman that never did one of ye harm—that has neither father, nor brother, nor husband, to stand up for her—and that is no more mistress who she shall meet on the common road, or who will speak to her, than you or me. There's no a man among you but should have been a lone lassie's defender and guard of honour had ye listened to me!'

With these words Mr. Galbraith started forth into the night, in all the grandeur of indignation, leaving the club of rural gossips much disconcerted. He had taught the most of them all they knew of book-learning, and there were few who had not a certain awe of the Maister who had corrected his youth. There was silence when he went out, followed after an interval by a feeble attempt at a laugh. 'The Dominie's mounted his high horse,' somebody said in the darkness; but there was no immediate echo of the sentiment. And what the Dominie had commenced was accomplished triumphantly by Mrs. Macwhirter, the smith's wife, who came forward with her baby in her arms, to sound a note of victory over the discomfiture of 'the men.'

'Eh, but ye've weel deserved it!' she said, 'clashing and clavering like a wheen auld wives. That I should say sae! There's no an auld wife in the country-side that's a man's match for an ill tongue. A' the nasty stories that are ever told in this parish, and mony a parish mair, trace them up, and ye'll ay find they've come frae the smiddy, or the public, wherever there's men meeting. Eh, lads, I would think shame——'

'Gang back to your weans!' said the smith, peremptorily. 'It's late, friends, and time we were a' in our beds. I'll wish ye good night, for it's time to shut up the place. Gang back, I say, woman, to your weans.'

And the meeting of the rural convocation was brought to a sudden close.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE morning rose anxiously over all the personages of this little drama. Isabel, sleepless, fatigued, and unresolved, rose pale to the new day which she felt might bring change incalculable to her life. Jean, who kept hovering about her, watching with keen attention every movement she made, increased Isabel's suppressed agitation. There was a permanent flush on her face;

her eyes were abstracted, and took little note of what was going on. She seemed scarcely aware of the passage of time, and was irritated when she was called upon to sit down at the table and eat, and go through all the ordinary domestic routine. 'Oh, if you would leave me quiet!' she exclaimed, half unconsciously, turning away her face from the scrutiny of which she was only half aware.

'My bonnie woman! you're no weel?' said Jean.

'I am quite well; there is nothing the matter with me. I have—a headache. I don't feel—able to talk,' said Isabel, stumbling from one sentence to another. And then she wound up with the plaint of weariness, so familiar in its sound, 'Oh, if you would let me be!'

Let her alone—leave her to revolve and re-revolve the questions that were rushing through her mind in endless succession without any answer! Poor Jean did her best to answer this prayer. She went and shut herself up in the kitchen with her children, and gave them their dinner. And then she thought the broth was exceptionally good, and that fasting was bad for a headache; so she got up from her own meal and carried a basin of the family soup into the parlour. 'They're real good the day,' she said, wistfully; 'try a spoonfu', Isabel.'

Isabel was standing at the window once more looking out. She turned round quickly at the sound of the opening door, and a blaze of momentary anger came across her face. 'No, no,' she said, 'I could not eat;' and then sat down suddenly, drawing her work to her. Jean stood in the doorway and gazed, holding always the basin in her hand.

'Are you looking for somebody?' she said. 'Oh, Isabel, if you would but tell me! There's something wrong, but what it is I canna tell.'

'There is nothing wrong,' said Isabel; and for a moment her needle flew through her work, while Jean stood looking at her. Then she roused to impatience again, 'I said I had a headache; if you would leave me quiet, just for a little while——!'

'I'll do that, my bonnie woman,' said Jean; and withdrew regretfully with her broth. But before she resumed her place at the table another thought struck her. This time it was a glass of wine she carried into the parlour. 'No to disturb you, Isabel,' she said; 'but a young thing like you shouldna fast so lang. I've brought you a glass of sherry-wine; it's no ill to take and it will keep your heart——'

'I want nothing, thank you,' said Isabel.

'But you'll take it to please me,' said Jean. Just then

a knock at the door made both of them start. Isabel, without speaking, raised her eyes with a dumb, wistful appeal to the only comforter within her reach. And Jean, in her agitation, spilled the wine as she placed it on the table. 'It's maybe naebody,' she said, with sudden comprehension, and with a yearning of her heart over the child about to be exposed to danger and trial.

'What will I do?' cried Isabel, clasping her hands.

'Oh, Isabel, think of the bairn, and the Lord will be a guide to you,' said Jean, with tears in her eyes. Not a word of explanation had passed between them, but the elder woman came and kissed the younger one with a sudden understanding of the conflict and struggle such as no words could have conveyed to her. Then the knock was repeated, and Jean hurried away to open the door, wiping her hands with her apron. Her own anxieties and jealousies were all quenched in a moment in that rush of genuine sympathy. 'For she ay likit the lad!' Jean said to herself, feeling by instinct that poor Isabel had traitors within as well as temptations without.

It was, however, not Stapylton, but the Dominie who stood waiting at the door; and the revulsion of feeling was such that Jean could scarcely be civil to Mr. Galbraith. 'Oh, aye, she's ben the house; but she's no weel the day, and I canna have her vexed,' said Isabel's anxious guardian, looking jealously at this new disturber of her repose.

'I'm sorry she's not well; but I have not come to vex her,' said the Dominie. His reception was so strange a one that it was not wonderful if it startled him. When he went into the parlour he met the wistful gaze of Isabel's dilated, excited eyes; but when she saw it was him, and not another, her look changed in a moment, and she fell into a sudden outburst of tears. Disappointment, relief, a strain of feeling which he could not understand, was in the sudden change which came over her face—and the Dominie, being but a man, was not so quick of apprehension as Jean.

'I have startled you, my dear,' he said.

'Oh, not startled—' said Isabel; 'but—my head aches; and—I was not expecting you—and——'

The explanation fell into a broken murmur of words; and she dried her tears hastily with an agitated hand. The Dominie had come with the intention of saying some word of warning; though how it was to be introduced, or what kind of warning it was to be, he could not have told anyone. He had hoped that circumstances might have led to some remark about the strangers in the parish, and that he would have said

something which should 'put her on her guard.' Such warnings seem so much easier to give when the person to be warned is not present. He sat down by her in her little parlour, and found that, so far as his mission was concerned, he had not a word to say.

'What would you say to a change of air,' said the Dominie, 'if you are not well?'

'You forget I have just come home.'

'And so I did,' he said. 'But I do not like these mild inland places like the Bridge of Allan. If you were to go to the sea, or to the hills——'

'I am best at home,' said Isabel.

And then there was a dead pause. She had taken her work, and was labouring against time, her needle flying through the linen, her head bent down over it. Mr. Galbraith gave a quiet sigh, and felt himself baffled. He did not know how to introduce his subject, and he could not understand the state of suppressed excitement in which she evidently was.

'There are a great many strangers in the parish just now,' he said at last, himself making the remark which he had hoped might have come from her, 'and some that are not strangers altogether. I hear, Mrs. Lothian, that you've been at Ardnamore?'

'Yes, I've been at Ardnamore.'

'And you've seen them *all*? ' asked Mr. Galbraith, with emphasis.

'I have seen Ailie and—Mr. John,' she said, raising her eyes to his face. (It seemed to her, as she spoke, that there was another step on the road, and that she could hear it pause at the cottage-door; and in her trouble she betook herself to craft, as was natural.) 'But you must not ask me about them,' she said; 'it was more—than I could bear. It—brought everything back. It is that, I suppose, that has made me so foolish to-day.'

'It can never be foolish to remember what is past,' said the Dominie, reassured. 'Don't drive the thought from you, as silly folk tell you. The past is precious; sometimes it is all that is left to us. You are young, and you have your child; but I doubt if you will ever have such a treasure as yon year. Isabel, my dear, I've seen you a bairn, though you were my friend's wife. Think on him still. There are few such seen in this life.'

'I know that well,' said Isabel, glad, poor child, in unconscious hypocrisy to secure thus a pretence for her too ready tears.

'Aye, think upon him!' said the Dominie. 'You're bonnie and young, and may get the offer of many a

man; but, perhaps, never another like him—most likely never another like him. You should be proud of the past. You have had one of the best men that ever was born; and if you had been an angel out of Heaven, he could not have set you up higher, or made more of you. Isabel, sometimes you must think of that!’

‘Oh, I think of it!’ said Isabel, with streaming eyes. And the Dominie drew his large hand over the great caves that lay under his eyebrows; his heavy eyelids were wet, and the muscles quivering about his mouth. He did not attempt to explain to her, nor even to himself, why he was so much in earnest, why he addressed her in so solemn a strain. It seemed natural. As for Isabel, she wanted no explanation; she was neither offended, nor even surprised. The very atmosphere around her spoke to her as plainly as he had spoken. At such a crisis it was but natural that everyone should be moved, even stocks and stones if that could be.

‘And now I must go away,’ he said, rising, with a smile gleaming out under the unshed tear. ‘It’s the hour of the bairns’ dinner, and a kind of necessity was upon me to come and see you. No; I’ll take nothing. The afternoon school is not so long. God bless you, Isabel! and guide you aright—in—’

He broke off in the middle of the sentence, as if (she thought) there was something he could not trust himself to say—and went away without looking round, or adding any ordinary farewell. But his agitation did not wound or even surprise Isabel. She dried her own wet eyes when he was gone, and tried to throw herself back, as he had told her, into ‘yon year’—the year of her marriage—when she had been worshipped like something divine, and guarded as the apple of her husband’s eyes. ‘You should be proud of the past,’ her Mentor had said. And Isabel had strained at it, trying with all her might to bring it back to her mind; but could not. Her imagination rushed instead to that meeting on the hill-side under Ardnamore, to every word, every look, every tone of that strange interview. Oh, how bitter it was, to be unable to control her thoughts, or turn them as she would, or keep them to matters which her mind could approve. They escaped from her with a leap to go to *him*; and with a guilty pang at her heart, Isabel felt that the bitter was not so poignant, not so irresistible as the sweet.

Baby Margaret woke, and began to cry from the inner room, while her mother sat lost in this struggle. Isabel rose with the alacrity of custom to take the child; but Jean rushed suddenly in before her, and had the infant in her arms before the mother could reach it.

Jean was pale, and her eyes all a-glow with excitement. 'Na, na,' she said, holding the child fast, 'leave her with me. There's ane coming up the brae, Isabel, that ye'll have to see.'

'Give me my bairn,' said the poor young mother with a cry; and then she sank trembling in a chair, her very limbs failing under her. Half defiant, half sympathetic, Jean stood before her with the baby in her arms.

'It's no fit she should be here. You'll have to see him, and to say what's to be. But, oh, Isabel, dinna forget that you have a bairn!' said Jean, with sudden tears.

'No till I forget myself,' said Isabel, not knowing what she said; and then there was a sudden stillness round her, and she became aware that she was face to face with her fate.

She raised her eyes, which were veiled with dreams, yet shining with suppressed excitement, to the face of Stapylton, who stood looking down upon her. The man who had tried to beguile her from her last duty to Margaret—who had wooed her and tempted her, and almost spurned her on the braes—who had written that letter—who had left her for a whole year alone to comfort herself as she might, before she could consent to permit the other truer, generous love to console her in her solitude. All this rushed through her mind as she looked up at him; and at the same moment her heart flew from her like a bird, and took refuge, as it were, in his breast. She had no power to help herself.

'Isabel,' he said, 'I have come to say what you would not let me say yesterday. Why should we keep apart, you and I? I have not come to speak of the past—not a word. Thank Heaven it is over. It shall never be mentioned between us. You were my Isabel when my father sent for me; be my Isabel now.'

'How can that be?' she said, under her breath.

'It can be,' he answered, bending down over her; and—it was not self-delusion on her part—there was a softness in his voice, a tenderness that had never been there before. For the first time Isabel felt a certainty that he was thinking of her, how to be most gentle to her, how to please and to move her, more than of himself. 'I might have looked for you on the hills as I used to do,' he went on, 'but I thought it was best to come here to your own home. Isabel, there is no time for courting now. We cannot play with the thought, and quarrel, and make friends, as we used to do. Life is more serious nowadays. We must be man and wife!'

'You are not the judge, Mr. Stapylton,' she cried, with a touch of her old impatience; 'it is for me to settle that, and not you.'

'But you will settle it, Isabel. We are older, we should know our own minds, and the time for the braes is over,' he said. 'Isabel! you have never been out of my heart. I tried to forget you at first, and then—but I said there was to be nothing of the past.'

'You succeeded well,' said Isabel, 'in forgetting me. There was a year—a whole year——'

He sat down by her and took her hand. She had given up the contest when she thus upbraided him; and it seemed to her, as he seated himself by her side, that a strange long dream was over, and that all things were again as they had been when the two had met upon the braes.

'I was not a free man,' he said; 'my father was lying dying, and he would not die. Don't question me of that. Is it not all past? And, my darling, you are mine again.'

'No; oh no,' she cried, with a little instinctive shudder, drawing back; 'there was more—far more, than that.'

'What more?' He was pale with the suspense and with eagerness. He stretched out his hand again to claim hers, which she had withdrawn. 'Yes, there was more,' he continued, looking fixedly in her face; 'would to God I could forget the rest!'

A flush of shame rushed over Isabel's cheeks. At that moment, when he professed for her a constant love which had known no interruption, what could she say of her own marriage; how could she even think of it? Was it not treachery, almost vice? The colour came up like flame over her face. She felt their positions changed at once, and she herself put to the bar.

'I was alone in the world,' she said, 'and I had not heard of you—not a word, for a whole year.'

Now, indeed, he got her hand into his, and triumphed over all her pretence at indifference. She had begun to excuse herself, almost to beg his pardon. 'We will speak of it no more,' he said; 'now my Isabel is mine again we'll think of it no more.'

'Oh! hush, hush, I never said that,' she cried, evading his caress. But he was close by her as in the old days; his voice, so much softened, in her ears—that voice which had first woke echoes in her girl's heart; his hand holding hers, and her heart melting, yearning to her first love. How could she resist not him only, but herself? She had no heart to say him nay. After this sudden renewal what would become of her if life settled down again in its grey colours, and he disappeared out of it once more for ever? A month ago that subdued life, with her child in it for sunshine, had been very sweet—but now?

And yet, in the very happiness that thus stole over her,

there was a grasp and constriction in her throat, as of guilt and pain. She was doing something for which she could never have anything but blame from herself or from others—for which she could not defend herself. Her reason seemed to stand by disapproving, regretful, while the poor heart of her made the plunge. The one was no help to the other. Her unity of being was all torn asunder and made an end of. She did not think this in so many words, but was vaguely, dimly conscious of it, as the happiness stole flooding through her, penetrating every nook and corner. 'Oh, Horace! do you not feel as if it should not be?' she said, with one last effort to resist.

'I feel that it ought to be,' he said, drawing her close to him. 'If you wish me to have a hope in the world, —if you would not see me perish; not for your sake, Isabel, that are innocent, but for my sake——'

'Are you not innocent?' she said, gazing at him with wonder and alarm in her great, tear-dilated eyes.

He put his head down upon her arm, upon the sleeve of her black dress, and kissed that. He had her hand in his, but it was not her hand which he touched with his trembling lips. And she felt that he trembled. For the first time his heart was so touched that the very frame felt the vibration. It was so different from his composure of old, that it moved Isabel beyond expression. When he answered her with an almost groan, his voice half stifled by his attitude, she leaned over him to catch what he said, as if it had been the most precious utterance. 'Not innocent like you,' he said sighing, almost moaning as from a heavy heart. And she melted and yearned over him like a mother over a child.

'Oh, Horace, if you have done wrong we will set it right!' she said, unconscious of the vast pledge she took. And thus the contest was ended, and all the struggles of reason made an end of it in one outburst of that enthusiasm of pity and tenderness which raises innocent love to the height of passion. The moment she could escape from him, Isabel rushed to the door without saying a word. She opened it, all radiant yet all tearful, her eyes shining, her face full of soft colour, the lines of her mouth quivering with sobs and smiles. Outside, Jean was walking about, very grave and almost stern, with Baby Margaret lying on her shoulder, hushing, or trying to hush, the child to sleep. But the child had no intention of sleeping; she lay with her head over Jean's shoulder, and two great grave eyes gazing intent into the summer air in that wonderful abstraction of childhood which is so mysterious and unfathomable. To her excited mother it

seemed as if the child already disapproved and protested, and was saddened by the event which she could not understand. Isabel snatched her baby out of her step-mother's arms, who gazed at her like Margaret, and understood better why this sudden movement was. She felt the momentary chill strike to her heart; but did not stop to realise it. Without saying a word, she returned again into the parlour where Stapylton sat surprised awaiting her. He, too, understood her meaning when she reappeared with her child in her arms. She came up to him with two great tears running over from her brilliant, excited eyes; her mouth quivering so that she could scarcely speak; yet smiling. She held out her baby to him without a word. Perhaps it was that he had not expected, had not thought of this little living evidence of the ineffaceable past. He rose to his feet with a sudden hoarse exclamation. The joy in his face sank into a momentary wildness, almost horror; and he trembled as the child's unconscious, solemn eyes gazed at him. Another pang and chill came over Isabel; she had thought he would have taken the child from her, and kissed it, and vowed some tender vow of protection and love. But this, too, was momentary, and passed before she had time to realise it. He did not take the child, but he took the mother into his arms, embracing the bewildered baby also without touching her. 'She shall be my child,' he said.

His child! Isabel broke away from him, and clasped her baby to her bosom, and sat down apart and cried. Ah, no! For the first time a distinct sense of the claims of the other who was dead and gone, but who was little Margaret's father, came with a certain sickening pang to her heart. His wife might go from him and be another man's wife: could his child, too, be another man's child, and every trace of him disappear from the earth? Ah, no!—once more, no! She said nothing, restrained, even at that moment, by the strange, new, instinctive sense that she must not breathe a word that could suggest prejudice or dislike to the mind of her lover in respect to her child; but in her heart there rose a certain jealousy of him for her dead husband's sake, a remorse and compunction unspeakable. She had given herself up to him; she had appealed to him, with moving looks and gestures, to take her child too into his heart; and yet her whole being roused into contradiction of his claim, into dumb indignant assertion of the real father's right, as soon as he responded to her appeal. She sat apart from him, not looking at him, holding little Margaret to her heart and weeping hot tears with a vehemence which Stapylton could not understand. And she could not

understand it herself; she could do nothing but weep her passion out, already putting restraint upon her tongue, feeling instinctively that her freedom had gone from her, that she dared not say to him in his moment of triumph what sudden thought had arisen in her mind. Thus it was with poor Isabel, in the moment of what might have been her triumph too, when she gave up her heart and her life into the hands of the only man she had ever loved.

CHAPTER XL

THEY were married very shortly after—there being no reason why they should wait. Nobody approved of them nor of their match, nor would have been likely to do so had they waited half a dozen years. Their little world stood round, as it were, and gazed upon them, declaring it washed its hands of all responsibility. Her stepmother went about the house as if she were assisting at a funeral—even little Mary turned reproachful eyes upon her.

‘Poor wee baby! Poor wee Margret!’ she would say, caressing the child. ‘Why is she *poor* baby?’ said Isabel, and little Mary would sigh and shake her head. As for Miss Catherine, she made a formal proposal to take the child under her own care, and leave Mrs. Lothian to ‘her other duties.’

‘A bairn in the house will be an interruption,’ she said. ‘A man with a young wife is often impatient enough of a baby of his own; and ye cannot expect he would be more tender to another man’s child.’

‘She is my child!’ said Isabel, holding her baby tightly strained in her arms.

‘But she is my dear old friend’s child as well,’ said Miss Catherine; ‘and she should not be brought up in ignorance of her father’s very name.’

‘Oh, Miss Catherine, you are hard—hard!’ cried Isabel. ‘If he was your friend, he was my husband, and knew all, and would never, never have judged me like this!’

‘Isabel Diarmid,’ said Miss Catherine, sternly, ‘it’s little more than a year since he was brought home to his house to die, and for a time I thought it was your death-blow too; and now, with your baby in your arms, you are going to wed another man. You should not speak of harsh judgment to me.’

‘But I must,’ said poor Isabel. ‘Oh, Miss Catherine, if you would but think how it all was. Can I put it in words? I was fond—fond of him—and oh! but he was good to me. But you know—the difference; and if you

had said a month since—*He* is coming; let us fly away, not to meet him, not to bring back the past—I would have gone to the end of the world. I would be—almost—glad—now—

‘Of what, Isabel?’ cried Miss Catherine. ‘My dear, my dear, come, and I will go with you, and free you from this man!’

‘I can never be free of him—now!’ she said. ‘To say the words is an offence to me. I would have clung to my old life, to be Mr. Lothian’s widow and little Margaret’s mother, and nothing more; but now that is all past. If that was what you wanted, why did you let me see the one man—the only man—’

Here Isabel stopped, silenced by her sobs and her shame. She was not ashamed to love him, but she was ashamed to say it in words, to disclose the sacred depths of the heart to any strange eye. She bent her crimson tear-wet face over her child. Poor little Margaret! if she could have known the meaning of all those looks of trouble, and passion, and distress, at which she gazed so gravely with profound baby eyes! Miss Catherine rose up and shook out her dress with an agitated movement, as if shaking the very dust from it, according to scriptural injunction; and yet she had been touched, though she would not admit it, by Isabel’s cry.

‘You must judge for yourself,’ she said. ‘All has been said that can be said. I cannot change your heart or settle your life for you, one way or another. You must do as you will. You know what I think, and what a sore blow this is to me; and I can say no more.’

And Miss Catherine swept out of the room and out of the house, leaving poor Isabel with her face hidden and her heart torn asunder.

It did not even strike Isabel as strange that she received no overtures of friendship from his family, nor, indeed, heard of them in any way. Her case seemed too far removed out of the ordinary course of life to leave her any interest in ordinary circumstances. She never thought of his people; all who surrounded herself were hostile or disapproving, and the effect upon her was to make her independent (as she thought) of sympathy. The world was hard upon her, and she turned her back upon the world.

And thus it happened that they were married, without paying any attention to the objections and protestations of Loch Diarmid. It was in the beginning of winter, when little Margaret was nearly a year old. Margaret’s father had been but a year and a half dead, which was the fact that chiefly shocked the parish.

Stapylton took his bride to a pretty sea-side village

further down the Clyde where the winter was mild, and where there were no associations to disturb the peace of their beginning. He bore with her in her distress at that temporary parting with her child—he bore with her anxieties about little Margaret and longings after her, in the little interval which he might have claimed as specially his own. He was thoughtful of her every wish, putting aside his own comfort (she thought) for hers. And Isabel found herself, all unawares, wrapt in that dream of happiness which most hearts entertain one time or other, and which so few realise. Out of her doubts she came into a sense of reality which was exquisite to her—and she who had loved her lover without believing in him, grew, with a blessed surprise and delight, which was like Heaven to her, to trust as much as she loved. The change was like that from night into the brightest day. She had reached the heights all radiant with the sun rising, after the valley of the shadow of death.

‘You have been a bride of brides,’ he said to her one day, when a few weeks of this dream had gone. ‘You have never asked me where we were to go, or what we were to do. I wish I could reward you for your trust, my love, and take you to a fine castle, and say you were queen——’

‘It was not that,’ said Isabel, ‘don’t praise me too much. It was because I had so much in my mind I forgot. But, Horace, it is trust now.’

‘And that is all I want,’ he said, ‘and we can settle together where we are to go.’

‘But you have your own home?’ said Isabel.

‘I sold that; did I never tell you? I have no ties but you now,’ he said. ‘I meant to have gone to America—two years ago. Shall we go now? or shall we stay in your own country? or what are we to do?’

‘I have been a fool,’ cried Isabel, ‘to think of nothing all this time. But you must have had plans of your own.’

‘Yes, to disappear out of the world if you would not have me,’ he said; ‘but since I knew you would have me, everything else has gone out of my head.’ And then she clasped his arm with both her hands, and they walked on forgetting everything, even their plans. Oh, how different it was from the tender quiescence with which she had accepted the minister’s love! That had been but a dream and this was life.

They went on together wandering along the beach which was lit up by all the glories of the sunset. She too happy to think of anything; he absorbed in her.

‘Oh, Horace, how different everything is!’ she said. Her heart was full and spoke out of its abundance. ‘If I could have thought this would ever come in those weary

days when I looked for you, and you stayed away from me——'

'But you forgot me, Isabel.'

'Did I forget you? Oh, how I wearied for you, Horace!' There was something like guilt in the confession; but the meaning in her mind was different from his conception of it. The time in which she 'wearied' for him had not been that pure, calm, cloistered year of her marriage, when all vain thoughts and wishes had been hushed in the unspeakable quiet. She had not thought of him then. She had been faithful and true as an angel to her father-husband, whose love surrounded her like a dwelling-place, and kept her pure from all the soils of earth. So detached was that period from her life that she did not even remember it while she spoke. It was a vision, a trance, a world apart. But in the other agitated world of her young lonely life it seemed now as if there had been but one thought, and that was him. 'You left me all that year—all that weary, weary year, after our Margaret was taken from me,' she said, looking up at him with her tender, shining eyes; 'and I thought I would break my heart.'

'And at the end of it——' he said, 'shall I remind you, Isabel, how you showed your love to me? or shall we let by-gones be by-gones, and speak of it no more?'

'How I showed my love for you?' said innocent Isabel—innocent, heartless, ungrateful—and yet, in her heart, loyal, after their degrees, to all affections. She looked in his face with genuine surprise. And then, all at once, with a scorching blush remembered what he meant.

'He was so good to me,' she murmured, with downcast looks; 'oh, so kind, like my father! What could I do? It was different. Never, never, could he have been—like you.'

Stapylton drew her to his side with a shudder. 'We'll speak of it no more,' he said; 'I could not trust myself, Isabel; one moment of my life I was in Hell—and it was by seeing you——'

'Seeing me?' she said, aghast.

'With him—more lovely than I ever dreamt of—in London—at the opera. My God! when I think of it,' said the young man, with a blackness impenetrable to her anxious gaze coming over his face.

'Oh, Horace! was it you? Oh, was it you? There was something there that made me miserable. Oh, my Horace!' she said, with pity, and remorse, and terror, clinging to his arm.

'It was Hell!' he said, wiping his forehead, upon which great drops of moisture were standing. 'I had been forgetting as best I could—till then. It was Hell; but this is Heaven,' he added, after a pause, holding her

closer. Isabel, terrified and appalled, clung to him, gazing, with her wistful eyes, into his face. 'It is all past now,' she said, clinging close to him, with her hands clasped on his arm.

'My darling! and this is Heaven!'

One evening, a week later than the conversation we have just recorded, it happened unfortunately that the cry of a child in one of the cottages awoke the heart of the young mother within her. Her maternity had been slumbering, but was not weakened by absence from her child. 'If I had but my baby!' she sighed softly, half to herself, without thinking—as, indeed, she ought to have done—what an interruption such an exclamation must have been to any young man's love-dream.

He said something—she could not distinguish what; but there was impatience in the tone, and it jarred upon her. He quickened his pace, too, out of the lover's ramble, drawing her along with him. When Isabel thought of it, she saw, with a new-born power of putting herself in his place, that it was cruel to bring in the baby at that moment; but at first it hurt her, and brought a little pang into her heart.

'Cannot you be content with me for a little?' he said; and then there was a pause, and they both turned, by instinct, to their lodgings. It was a winter night; but there are nooks along the coast where the soft west, even in Scotland, cheats the visitor into dreams which would better become the south. The sun was setting behind the Arran hills, lighting up all the horizon with a brilliant wintry glory. The tints were deeper, the gold more dazzling, than in summer; and far away stretched the sea, blue as steel, and brimming over with a rounded fullness, as if it could hold no more. The night air blew somewhat chill in their faces: perhaps it was that alone which made Isabel so cold and so willing to return.

'If we were to go away there,' Stapylton said, pointing across the steel-blue glistening water, 'it would be hard work exposing a baby to such a voyage. Could you make up your mind, Isabel, to leave her at home?'

'Leave—my child!' she cried, with a little shriek; and her joy all at once seemed to die suddenly out of her heart.

'I do not say so,' said Stapylton; 'I am only making a suggestion. At her age it would be hard upon her. You could not get milk for her, nor anything. Poor child! If you could trust her to anyone at home——'

'Oh, Horace, ask me anything but that,' said Isabel, clinging to his arm.

'Well, well,' he said, subduing his impatience, as her quickened senses could discern, by an effort, 'I am not

asking you to do it; I am only suggesting what might be for her good.'

And then they went in, and a change came over the heavens and the earth to Isabel. It was not that he had changed: he was as anxious to be good to her, to save her all annoyance, to make her happy, as ever. It was that a note, which jarred upon the perfect happiness she had begun to rise into, had been struck, as it were, unawares. Her husband was still her lover, still full of fond delight in her, and eager to please her; but a meaning she could not quite fathom, a purpose which was not made clear to her, seemed to be under his love and his fondness—now more, now less clearly visible from that day. He spoke a great deal of America, pointing out all its advantages to her; and Isabel, who had no dear friends to leave behind her, and of whom her neighbours all disapproved, was not disinclined to think of emigration. But then there were the discomforts of the voyage, upon which he insisted with ever-strengthening force of words.

'I would never hesitate if we were alone; but the child necessitates a maid,' he said, 'and the maid brings other troubles in her train.'

'But I want no maid; I can take care of my child without any help,' cried Isabel.

'And if you did that how much should I see of you?' he said, with an almost sneer. 'No, Isabel, I don't want to be disagreeable, but my wife must be my wife, and not a baby's nurse.'

'She will soon be walking,' said the young mother, trying with anxious wiles to recommend her child. 'She would soon be—a help to me, Horace, instead of a trouble.'

'You must consider it all well,' he said; 'it is not just our—your own pleasure that you must think of; you must remember what you owe to the child. She is too young for a long voyage, Isabel; probably she might fall ill—and die. My dear, I don't want to frighten you—babies so often do.'

'Oh, Horace, not with my care!' cried Isabel. 'God would protect her by sea as well as by land. The poor women have all their little children with them. What should happen to my darling more than to the rest?'

'But it does happen to the half of the rest,' he said, calmly. 'I don't want to frighten you, Isabel; but afterwards, if anything were to happen, you would blame me for not telling you. And then if she lived and grew up she might object to be severed from all her friends and her own country. She has her friends, I suppose—her—father's friends.'

'She can have no friend so near as her mother,' said Isabel, in a voice which was scarcely audible.

'What do you say? Of course you are her mother, my dear; but if she were to grow up to feel herself alone in a family, she—did not belong to, one may say—don't you think she would reflect upon you for taking her from her home? My darling! I did not mean to vex you; I am only saying what you will think yourself when you look at it calmly and see it in a reasonable light.'

'Oh, Horace, Horace,' cried Isabel, clasping her hands, 'did not you say she should be as your own? You would not take your own child from its mother? You would not leave her behind?'

'Why should not I,' he said, 'if it would be for the child's good?'

For a moment she looked at him aghast, and then hid her face in her hands. He towered over her in superior virtue condemning her woman's weakness. 'If it were for the child's good. It is not our own pleasure we must think of.' The sound of these sentiments bewildered Isabel. Was it possible that her eagerness to keep her baby at any cost or risk was but the selfishness of maternity? Could it be that he would actually be so self-denying as to leave even his own child behind him, if it was 'for its good'? Isabel's heart protested against such virtue, and yet it silenced her indignant cry.

'I believe I have strength of mind enough to do it,' he said, 'if it was for the child's good. Drag her out there with you to undergo all the hardships of a long voyage, to be exposed to disease perhaps, to be parted from her own relations and the country in which her property lies. If she had been unprovided for the case might be different.'

There was a shade of bitterness in his voice. Was he angry that little Margaret's fortune was safe and out of reach, though he himself had taken pains to make all the arrangements? Isabel withdrew her hands from her face, and gazed at him confused by his vehemence. What could it be that he meant?

'But she is very well provided for,' he added, with meaning—'quite a little heiress. And her friends would never be content that her property should go out of the country. I see a thousand difficulties in the way. And if I were you, I would choose the most careful guardian I could get for her, and leave her quietly at home, at least till she knows what is what, and can decide for herself.'

'Oh, Horace, do you remember she is my child—my only child, that I love more than my life? If I had to leave her I would die!' cried Isabel; 'but I cannot leave my baby, it would be worse than leaving my life.'

'Which shows you don't make much account of me,' said Stapylton. And then he went out suddenly and left her, leaving all those suggestions to take form and germinate within her. She threw herself down on the sofa in the little lodging-house parlour, and hid her face in the cushions. It would be too much to investigate what her thoughts were at this dreadful moment. A storm raged within her moving Heaven and earth. A hundred mocking spirits seemed to come round and gibe at her, and laugh at her vague, splendid anticipations. Was the joy over, and the consolation, along with the honeymoon? And were distress, and distrust, and a consuming terror to enter in and take possession so soon?

CHAPTER XLI

WHEN a honeymoon has been thus disturbed the idyll is over, and the only safe thing for the two human creatures who have thus played too long the dangerous drama of Love in Idleness is to get back with as little delay as possible to common life and work. Most frequently it is the woman who retards this salutary change of scene, hoping fondly that the idyll may come back, and fearing the ordinary routine which must separate to some extent the two existences. But Isabel was not in the innocent, primitive position which could render such a delusion possible. She had thought that this alone was life, and that all that went before was a dream; but every day, as it went on, made her more and more aware that the past was no dream, that it could not be severed from her soul, or sink into annihilation, however rapturous and vivid the present might be. She sat at the window of her lodging and did her fancy work, and watched her husband's moods, and longed to be back. Oh, to be back!—if he were but a labouring man in a cottage going out to his wholesome work, coming in to find everything prepared for him, his wife and his house bright with smiles at his approach—instead of the lounging, the caressing, the vacancy, the fits of fondness and fits of sullenness, and anxious watching of the changes of his face.

'Did not you once speak of a farm, Horace?' she said with a hesitation that was almost timidity, when he had himself burst forth into an angry exclamation about the dullness of the place.

'I hate this country,' he said, with impatience; 'but if you have made up your mind you won't go to America——'

'Indeed I never said so.'

'No, of course you never did; but it comes to the same thing. And by the way, I bought some of Smeaton's stock,' he said; 'I thought I might have to wait and kick my heels at your door, Isabel, longer than you made me do. You were kinder than I expected. I thought I might have had to wait, and that I had better be doing something. I had forgotten all about that.'

He thought he might have had to wait! The tone in which he said it was not unkind, but there was in it that note of incipient scorn which a woman's ear is so fine to catch. She had yielded sooner than he expected. She had been an easy conquest after all his wrongs to her! The arrow went through and through Isabel's heart. Sudden shame and humiliation so penetrated her that all power of speech was gone for the moment. No wonder her friends, the country-side, all who knew her, should disapprove and look on her coldly—when even he——

'Was it a farm in our own parish you thought of?' she cried, faltering, after a pause.

'I thought of offering for Smeaton's once,' he said; 'but that was on account of you. Now I have got you, it is a different matter; but hang it, Isabel, we can't go on like this, you know. A man is bored to death here. Will you make up your mind, like a brave girl, to come with me directly and get it over, or shall we go back to Kilcranion, or somewhere, and wait till spring? By that time you ought to have made up your mind.'

'Horace,' she said, still speaking very low, 'to every thing but one thing I can make up my mind at once, and that one thing I can never do—never! Don't ask me. I cannot leave my baby behind.'

'But, by Jove, if I insist upon it, you *must*!' he cried, with a certain bravado in his tone.

She got up and went to him with a glow as of hidden fire in her eyes. 'I will not!' she said. 'I will do anything—everything else you ask me, but not this!'

With her the crisis had reached the point of desperation. But as for Stapylton, he gazed at her for a moment, and, struck by her passion, turned round with a shrug of his shoulders, and what he meant to be an air of indifference. 'For Heaven's sake don't make a fuss,' he said. 'I hate women who make a fuss—though I think you've always had rather a turn that way, Isabel. Well, never mind. It is better to wait for spring, anyhow. I'll run over to Kilcranion to-morrow, and engage one of the sea-bathing houses till April. They should be cheap enough.'

'But, Horace,' said Isabel, with parched and trembling lips, 'you must understand—not then nor now, can I

leave her behind me. It is but one thing. I will do whatever you wish—whatever you tell me, except this.'

He stood eyeing her for a moment, as if uncertain how to deal with this obstinacy. Then he turned away with once more that careless shrug of his shoulders.

'Of course it is the only thing I do ask,' he said, 'as is always the way with women. But never mind: May is better for a long voyage than December; and something may have happened by that time to change the circumstances—or you may have changed your mind.'

'What could happen, Horace? and I will never change my mind.'

'Well, well, say no more about it,' he said, 'and we shall see when the time comes.'

Next day she was left alone to think over all this, and exaggerate all her difficulties in her own silent mind, closed up from all possibility of help or sympathy. Stapyhton went off to Kilcranion in the morning, to look, as he said, for a house. He did not ask her to go with him, but took it for granted that she should remain behind with her fancy work, and be ready to receive him when he arrived by the evening boat. When she had watched the morning boat depart which conveyed him away, and found herself alone standing on the shore in this strange place where she knew no one, Isabel felt herself seized upon by the strangest tumult of feeling. She was free. His back was turned who was dearest to her, and yet whom she had begun to fear. Oh, if she had wings like a dove to flee to her baby! Oh, to go to Margaret!

A yearning came over her such as she could not restrain. She cried aloud, as the sheep do on the hill, in mournfullest bleating, for the lost lambs. Oh, her baby!—her nursling, taken out of her bosom! not by God, which must be borne; but by a caprice—a mistake—the unkind will of a man.

'Will he no be in to his dinner?' said the landlady, coming with a sharp knock to the door, and disturbing all Isabel's thoughts.

'Not till the evening,' said Isabel, hastily drying her eyes. 'Mr. Stapyhton is coming back by the last boat.'

'But ye'll hae your dinner yoursel,' said the woman. 'Fasting's ill for a'boddy, especially for the like of you. Eh, but you're red een, Mrs. Stapyhton! Him and you have had a little tiff afore he left.'

'No, indeed—nothing of the sort,' said Isabel, indignantly. 'And I don't want anything, thank you. I shall not want anything till Mr. Stapyhton comes back.'

'I never heard of a couple yet but what had a tiff whiles,' said the landlady, with philosophical calm;

‘especially when the man is about the house a’ day, and naething to do. You’re no to think too much o’ ’t. But dry your een, like a bonnie leddy, and gie him a smile when he comes hame.’

‘Indeed you are quite mistaken, I assure you,’ cried Isabel, half crying in her excitement, but trying to smile.

‘I have seen an awfu’ heap o’ couples in my day,’ said the woman, shaking her head in the composure of superior penetration. ‘And the fonder they are of ilk ither, ay the more like to have a tiff; but you’ll see it will a’ be blown past if ye gie him ane o’ your bonnie smiles when he comes hame.’

If there is anything which can intensify the gloom of one of those tragic contentions which sometimes rend man and wife asunder, it is this gleam of kindly, consolatory ridicule from without, throwing over the deadly combat the *fausse air* of a lovers’ quarrel. Poor Isabel could not cry after this interruption. How far had she floated beyond the light and pleasant time when a lovers’ quarrel, with its fond offence and fonder reconciliation, was possible! She took up her worsted work, poor mortal rag into which she had woven so many painful fancies, and sat down by the window, and tried to make out for herself some plan of action. But her thoughts went away from her like so many deserters, some to follow Horace, and wonder what intentions might be in his mind in respect to the future, and what his feelings really were towards her child; some to haunt the well-known place in which the baby was, and imagine every little detail of its existence. The little rooms at the Glebe came before her like an island of calm in the stormy ocean upon which she had launched herself; should she ever recover that peace, or such peace as that—should she ever come to have any security in her life again? And then her mind, which was so running over with thought as to be incapable of thinking, suddenly turned and caught at the poor landlady’s homely bit of philosophy: ‘Dry your een, like a bonnie leddy, and gie him a smile when he comes hame.’ Yes, she would give him a smile; she would crush down every suspicion—every terror; she would take it for granted—absolutely for granted—that he meant all good and no evil. She would smile upon him, and ignore everything that was not love and kindness—and surely love would conquer in the end.

This she said to herself, with a pathetic smile, wiping away the moisture which would come to the corners of her eyes; and then went out anxious, abject, ready to put herself under his feet, to meet the lord and master whose yoke she had wilfully taken upon her. She took

a walk first against the wind with the unconscious craft of weakness, until the colour was kindled in her cheek, and the light brightened in her eyes. He was more fond of her when she looked best. This strange, half-flattering, half-humiliating fact Isabel had already found out. And she must use every weapon now for the struggle which was a matter of life and death.

The effort was rewarded. When she went to the boat, like any Odalisque, having done all she knew to heighten the effect of her simple beauty, she perceived by her husband's first glance that she had succeeded. He looked at her with a fondness which had begun to die out of his eyes. 'What have you been doing to yourself?' he said; 'you are looking quite lovely. You have not suffered much from my absence. It is nice, after all, to have such a little wife to come home to. Come, and I'll tell you all I've been about.'

And they sauntered down, arm in arm, towards their lodging, feeling, after all, as if it had been only a 'tiff.' Only a lovers' quarrel! was that all? and no harm in the heart of the fond young husband, nor fear in that of the wife?

'Shouldn't you like to go to the old place?' he said, 'first? You can go if you like while I settle some other affairs. I'll take you to-morrow if you like, and bring a gig for you to take you to Kilcranion in the evening. Will that please you? You see I am not so bad as you thought.'

'Oh, Horace, as if I ever thought you were bad; as if you ever were anything but good to me, and full of love and kindness!' said Isabel, like a slave, trembling and glowing with happiness and with tears in her eyes.

'You may be sure that is what I always mean,' he said, in his lordly, condescending way; 'and now you know how to make me do anything you like. Look as lovely as you are looking now and be sweet to me, and you can't think how much I'll do to please you, my pretty darling!' He looked down upon her with such glowing eyes that Isabel was confused with the sudden revulsion. Could she doubt him after this? She clasped her hands on his arm and lifted her face to his, full of beseeching, flattering, appealing tenderness. If that was how to win him, then it should be that way; and if there was a little vague pang of she knew not what mingled with the sweetness, why then it must be herself who was to blame? Thus the transition from the old minister's princess to the young husband's 'pretty darling' was made in a confusing, bewildering sort of way. Una changed into Scheherazade or Zuleika all at once, without any preparation, no doubt would have felt the change bewildering.

And so did Isabel. But he was very tender to her and full of caressing fondness, and she was to be taken to her baby to-morrow. Was not that happiness enough to obliterate all lesser evils?

CHAPTER XLII

THE morning came so much wished for, in a blaze of wintry sunshine befitting such a joyful day. Kilcranion was a village on the other side of the hills from Loch Diarmid, which lived upon the summer visitors to 'the saut-water,' and shut up its houses all the winter through, so that Stapylton had been hailed as an angel of light, when he offered to take one of them, and had every difficulty smoothed out of his way. He was to go there when he had taken Isabel to the Glebe, and complete the necessary arrangements about the house, and would come for her, he said, in the evening to take her home.

Her heart beat so loudly when once more the steamer carried her up Loch Diarmid, that the very power of speech seemed to forsake her. This time there was no kind, homely face looking out from the pier to welcome her. No one knew she was coming. The village folk gave her a gruff 'good-day' as she passed, with a look towards her husband, half of scorn, half of disgust. There was no sign of life in the windows of the House, as they passed Lochhead together. People on the road stared at her, and then turned round and stared again, disapproving of her, unfriendly to him. Isabel had known it all, and believed that she had accepted it, half in scorn, half in resignation; but she felt the difference when it was thus brought before her. And Stapylton's face had clouded over the moment they set foot on the shores of Loch Diarmid. A sullen shadow came over him. He walked with his eyes cast down, saying little to her, taking no notice of anything around.

'I hate the place!' he said, with angry energy; 'if you had taken my feelings into consideration you would never have asked me to come back.'

'Oh, Horace!' cried poor Isabel, faltering, 'let me get my baby, and let us go wherever you like! I will never more ask you to come back.'

'Always that baby!' he said, with something that sounded like an oath; and thus all the flutter of joy was stilled in her heart as they went up the hill.

But when she entered the familiar house, and, rushing in all eager and breathless, found herself by the side of the homely cradle in which little Margaret was sleeping, the young mother's heart felt ready to burst with delight

and misery. She fell softly on her knees beside it, and worshipped. Soft tears gushed to her eyes, a soft transport filled her. 'Oh, my baby, my darling!' she cried, putting down her head upon the little coverlet, with other inarticulate cries, like the cooings of a dove. When she recollected herself, and looked up with a sudden pang of terror, she caught her husband's eye bent upon her with that look of incredulity which goes to a woman's heart. He thought it was a piece of acting for his benefit. He did not believe in the reality of any such overflowing of the heart over an unresponsive child. He would have been, indeed, more offended had he thought it real, than he was by the supposed simulation. The one would have proved his wife to be capable of loving something else as well as she did himself; the other was but the homage of weakness to power. 'You think you can take me in with all this,' he said, with a laugh. 'It is very good acting, Isabel; but I know better than that.'

'Acting?' she said, rising slowly to her feet, with wonder so great that it almost overwhelmed the pain.

'Yes,' he said, taking her into his arms. 'Do you think I don't know that not for all the babies in the world would you risk parting with me?'

She gave a little cry, which he did not understand; and all the sages in the world could not have explained to Horace Stapylton the nature of those tears which his wife shed on his shoulder, with her face buried in her hands; the anguish—the despair of ever understanding, he her, or she him; the sudden fiery indignation, the bitter disappointment, the struggle of love with love, and blame and pity. Oh, that he whom she loved could feel so! Oh, that he could be so little, so—— and then she stopped herself even in her thoughts, and moaned aloud.

'Well, well,' he said, superior and compassionate, 'don't take it so much to heart, if I've found you out. I'll go now, and at four o'clock I'll come back for you; but mind you are ready, for I don't want to be driving about the country in a moonless night.'

When he went away, Isabel felt that she drew a long breath of relief. She was glad, and yet how miserable it was to feel herself glad! She dropped wearily into a chair, and sat and gazed upon her sleeping child. She was thus seated in a kind of stupor, with eyes blinded with tears, when Jean came into the room. Jean had been mollified, in spite of herself, by the care her step-daughter had taken to provide for her. Even such a benefit could not purchase her approval of the marriage; but that and Isabel's absence, and a certain something in her eye, which did not speak of perfect satisfaction in her new lot, had touched Jean's kindly heart.

'Isna she a picture?' she cried, placing herself behind Isabel with uplifted hands of worship; 'and as thriving and as firm as heart could desire. Eh, Isabel! I thought she would have broken her bit heart the day you went away. There would be ay a look at the door, and stretching out her arms to everyone that came nigh, and ay another wail when the poor infant was disappointed. I got an awfu' fear that it might bring on something—but sin syne she's been as good and as bonnie as you see her now.'

'My little darling!' was all the young mother could say.

'Hoots, dinna greet: it's meeting and no parting now,' said Jean, with a keen look of inspection. And then there was a pause. Isabel had not the heart to move nor to speak, nor even to take her child into her arms.

'If it had been me I would have had her afore now! Hoots, never mind waking her; whisht, my bonnie lamb! Your little bed's saft, but no so saft as your ain mother's bosom. There she is to ye,' said Jean, putting the rosy, half-awakened child into her mother's arms. The good woman stood and gazed at the group with a cordial, kindly pleasure. 'Poor lass! poor bairn!' she said to herself as she watched the mother's passion of kisses and tears and unintelligible words: vague suspicions were creeping about Jean's mind. This close strain of passion, those tears which did not dry up as they ought to have done, or give place to smiles, filled her with alarm—an alarm, it must be confessed, not unmixed with satisfaction, for had not she, in common with all the country-side, declared that of such a marriage no good could come?

'Mr. Stapylton, he's away to Kilcranion?—ye're to bide there, I hear? but what for could you no come hame, Isabel, to your own house?'

'It is your house now,' said Isabel, with an attempt at a smile.

'Na, na, only the life-rent,' said Jean, 'of my ain end; and I'm awfu' thankfu' to have that. Am I one to come ben to the parlour and set up for a led dy? No, my bonnie woman, it's hers and yours a' the days of my life, as well as when I'm dead and gone. Him and you might have been as comfortable here as in Johnny Gibb's house at Kilcranion. There's nae accounting for tastes—but sure am I there's no a room in it equal to the new parlour here in the Glebe.'

'It is only for a short time—a month or two,' said Isabel.

'And where are you going then, if ane might ask?'

'We were talking of going to America,' said Isabel, under her breath. The child had relapsed into sleep again with its head nestled against her breast.

'To America!' said Jean. 'Eh, Isabel! that's an awfu' change to think of—and the bairn——?'

'What of the bairn?' cried Isabel in a sudden wild panic of terror; and gathering up her child's rosy, dimpled limbs in her arms, she rose and confronted her stepmother as if there could be any meaning or power in Jean's unconsidered words.

'Na, Isabel, I'm meaning nothing,' said Jean, falling back in dismay; the sharp misery of the young mother's tone, her desperate attitude, the sudden mastery of her excitement over all her motherly care not to disturb the baby, came like a revelation to her stepmother; with a woman's wit she seized upon the sudden pang which had come to herself, to comfort with that, the unknown and deeper misery which thus erected itself before her without a moment's warning. 'It's just that my heart will break to part with the darling,' she cried, putting her apron to her eyes.

And then Isabel calmed down and took her seat again, and shed a few silent tears, trembling meanwhile with excitement, and the secret something which Jean could see was 'on her mind' but could not divine. She made no complaint, however, and no disclosure, but quieted herself with a power of self-command which the homely but close observer standing by perceived to be new developed in her. When she spoke again it was about little Margaret's 'things,' that they might be packed up and ready when the gig came for them at four o'clock.

'Will ye take her away with ye?' said Jean; 'it's awfu' sudden; will ye take her this very night?'

'Do you think I would give my darling up again?' cried Isabel, with her cheek pressed against the child's cheek.

'If you're sure it's for the best,' said Jean, whose mind was really disturbed and anxious for her stepdaughter. 'Isabel, my bonnie woman, I'm meaning no slight to him; but men are queer creatures. They're no fond whiles of a little bairn that takes up the mother's time, even when it's their ain bairn; and she'll no go to strangers. And ye canna have her with you at night as ye used to have her. My dear, if I was you I would take time to think.'

'I will never part with my baby again!' said Isabel. In the quietness her old nature seemed to come back to her. The spell of Stapylton's presence began to lose its fascinations. She began again to feel that it was still lawful for her to judge and decide for herself.

'But if it was to make any—dispeace. I'm meaning no offence. She's well and safe, and ye can trust her with me. My bonnie woman! you must not do that in haste that you'll repent o' before the day's done.'

'How should I repent of it?' she said, hastily, but would not yield. She had made up her mind entirely how it was to be done. She would say not a word to her husband, but take it for granted as a thing inevitable. Even, if she saw that to be expedient, she would cover up her baby under her cloak, until the *trajet* was accomplished. In one way or other, howsoever she might be baffled, she had determined to take the child with her. All that Jean, who saw the practical difficulties better than she did, could succeed in settling was that Jenny Spence's eldest daughter, at present 'out of a place,' whom little Margaret knew, should go with her to Kilcranion, to take care of her, and relieve the young mother from constant attention to the child. Jean sent off her boy instantly to warn Nelly Spence that she must make ready. 'If she goes by the afternoon boat, she'll be at the house as soon as you,' said Jean; and when that was fairly accomplished, it was, as she said, a weight off her mind.

Meanwhile, Isabel sat sunk in a quiet which was almost stupor; the past days had been very agitating days. And now the stillness and the soft sleep of the child, and the embracing of the old kindly house which seemed to stretch its arms round her with a forgiving calm, and Jean's kindly accustomed ministrations lulled her very soul within her. The good things she had lost came back and floated round her, bringing something of their own peace into her heart; and all that was disturbing and novel had passed away for a moment like a dream. She felt as if she could have slept like the baby.

'Sleep, my darling, if ye can,' said Jean, compassionately, 'you've been doing more than you were able—it's the cold air, and then the fire——'

'No, no,' said Isabel, rousing up. 'Instead of that, if you will pack up her things, I'll take little Margaret out for a walk, while the sun is so warm on the braes.'

'Weel, weel,' said Jean, 'ye'll come to nae harm there *now*.' Not now, all the harm was over and done. 'And that she's no happy is written in her face,' Jean continued, as she watched her straying out into the sunshine, with a spark of natural wonder that she should take that way of spending the short day. But she was mollified when she saw that Isabel crossed the road to the spot on the hill where it had been Margaret's custom to pray. 'And she'll maybe get good there, poor thing, so ill as she has done for herself,' the sympathetic woman said to herself, looking out from the door. She had watched wilful Isabel so often taking her wayward course from that door; sometimes to meet her 'lad,' as in the old times upon the braes; sometimes demure and stately to

join Miss Catherine in some long longed-for pleasure; then leaning on her husband's arm, the serene minister's wife; then mournful in her widow's weeds. 'I understood a' but this,' Jean said, meditatively, to herself. 'But that she's no happy is written in her face.'

The child was now awake, smiling upon her, after the first momentary blank of forgetfulness, and had made her heart leap by saying, or stammering, 'Mamma,' the accomplishment which all this time Jean had been labouring to teach her. Little Margaret danced and babbled in her mother's arms, and stretched out her hands to the running burn and to the bare branches of the other Margaret's rowan-tree, when Isabel paused beneath it. She had meant to bring her great trouble out with her there, and to ask God's counsel, when she left the cottage; but the baby's mirth beguiled the poor young mother. She sat down on the grassy seat, and forgot everything, and played with her child. What good would thinking do her? What good (she had almost said, and stopped herself with a pang of reproach) would prayer do her? Oh, if she could but pray! and then, in her agitation, she caught at the momentary delight that was nearest to her, and played with her baby, and on the edge of the precipice forgot her terror. Then, as softer and softer thoughts gained her mind, Isabel rose up again, and, half stealthily, went past her own door and up the hill-side to the spot where she had so often met her lover under the little birch-tree. The grass and the heather were heavy with wintry moisture, but she was unaware of it. And again her head grew giddy, and everything looked to her like a dream. Was it Stapylton's wife who was standing there under the tree, where he had been so fond and so cruel? Was this his child in her arms? Was her life one and indivisible, or a thing of shreds and patches, broken into fragments? She stood and grew giddy with the thought, looking over the wintry braes, while little Margaret caught at the drooping branches of the birch, and laughed at the shower of dewy spray which they scattered over her. Her baby laugh seemed to her mother to wake echoes all over earth and Heaven—echoes that reached the churchyard, where *they* were lying who would have defended the child—which might reach the child's enemy on the road miles away, and put evil thoughts in his mind against the innocent, unconscious creature. And her child's enemy was her own lover and husband—could such a misery be?

She was standing thus as in a dream, when a voice in her ear made her start, and spring aside in mortal terror. She could not have told what she was afraid of. Something—anything—ghosts in the daylight: and what she

saw was not unlike a ghost. It was Ailie in her white dress, with a shawl over her head—Ailie, who had fallen as entirely out of Isabel's self-absorbed musings as if she had never been.

'What are you doing here, Isabel Diarmid?' she said, 'your courting's past, and you're married to another man. You have chosen this world, and you're satisfied. What are you doing here?'

'Oh, Ailie! you frighten me,' said Isabel, holding her child fast in her arms.

'Many a time I frighten myself,' said Ailie, 'I come and go, and I carena where. I am seeking the Lord and I canna find Him. Something says in my heart Lo here and Lo there—but there's nae sound of His coming, though I'm ay listening night and day?'

'And are you no better?' said Isabel, in her bewilderment; 'and is there no word of Mr. John?'

'Oh, aye, Mrs. Lothian, she's better,' said old Janet Macfarlane, coming forward nimbly from among the heather. The old woman was worn with anxiety and excitement, but kept her undaunted courage. 'I beg your pardon, I canna mind your new name; they're awfu' fashious thae English names. Mrs. Diarmid's a hantle better, since the letters came from Ardnamore. He's in Paris, he's among his grand friends. I canna understand what it's a' about myself, but he says it'll be in the papers if he shouldna hae time to write; and if your goodman should get an English paper, maybe you would let us hear. She's real weel, and taking her walks, her and me, like the auld times,' said Ailie's champion. She met Isabel's eye steadily, as she told this lie of pride and love. Ailie for her part took no notice. She was standing by Isabel's side, looking with wistful eyes on the wild landscape, and seeing nothing; a creature distraught, and torn out of all the common woes and rules of life—but not mad, though even her mother thought so—at least not yet.

'I was never ill,' she said softly, 'I want but one thing, Isabel, but that I canna get. I would be as well as you, and as light-footed, and as ready to do whatever there was to do—if I had but light from the Lord.'

'Has it never come back?' said Isabel, wistfully, not knowing what to say.

'Whiles I think it will never come back,' said Ailie, shaking her head, 'and whiles there is a glimmer of hope. My mother's ay at my side night and day; and if she is that kind, would He break His word? Isabel, it's an awfu'—awfu' trial! What are your trials to that? To be disappointed in your God! But if *she* is that kind, would He break His word? I never was a mother myself.

But if you were tempted with a' this world could bestow, would you give up your little bairn?'

A cry burst out of Isabel's heart. She clasped her child closer, and sprang apart from the strange questioner.

'Oh, no never—never! not if I should die.'

'And you're but a young thing, and she's but an old worldly woman,' said Ailie, with solemn calm, 'and would He break His word that's above a'?''

Isabel's heart, which had been momentarily still, beat so loudly at this unthought-of anticipation of her inmost struggle that she could not speak, but only gaze with awe and troubled wonder, while Ailie glided away as she came without another word. She passed along among the heather, threading her way by instinct, a strange, ghostly white figure, with her mother like a shadow beside her. Thus the shuttle which wove out one of those lives, shot across the other once again, making a mystic connection between them. Isabel went home, hushed and silent, after this strange encounter. The wonder of it overpowered her, and silenced her own thoughts.

'You have told me nothing about Ailie,' she said, when she was once more seated in the little parlour before the cheerful fire.

'She's taken to wandering far and near,' said Jean, 'ay in her white gown. Some say she's clean daft. poor lass; but I canna think it's as bad as that. She's awfu' good to the poor folk, and whiles will stop and say a word—if you'll believe me, Isabel—mair like our Margret's words and mair comforting and reasonable than when she spoke in *the power*.'

'But her heart is broken,' said Isabel, with a sigh, which came from the depths of her own.

'And there's something, they say down by, in this week's paper about Mr. John. But you'll hear better than me. Some awfu' business there's been in France about killing the king. They say he's one of thae revolutionaries. But I havena seen the paper myself,' said Jean. 'I'm thinking I hear the wheels of the gig coming up the brae.'

Isabel gave a hurried glance up in her face, and another at her child. A glance not of suggestion, but of speechless, bewildered appeal.

'Go out and meet your man, my bonnie woman,' her stepmother added hurriedly, 'and give me the bairn.'

Not another word was said between them on the subject. There was no confidence made, no counsel asked. But Isabel understood that her stepmother saw vaguely, yet truly, what was in her heart. The wintry afternoon was growing dark; the stars were already half visible in the frosty sky.

'Make haste, for it is getting late!' Stapylton shouted from the door. Isabel put on her own outdoor dress with trembling hands, while Jean dressed her child. Then she took little Margaret into her arms under her cloak. Her face was deadly pale with excitement, and resolution, and terror. She put up her white lips to her stepmother to kiss her, though such salutations were rare between them—and then went out firmly with her precious hidden burden—her heart bounding wildly against her breast.

'Make haste, Isabel!' her husband shouted from the gig. He did not get down to help her into it, having already begun to glide out of the habits of a lover. And, after an awful moment of fear, she found herself seated by his side, without remark on his part. The baby moved and struggled under the cloak, but Stapylton took no notice. 'What are you putting in now to delay us?' he cried to Jean, who was placing the child's little basket of 'things' behind. He was full of impatience to be off, and thought of nothing else for the moment. 'It will be quite dark before we get home,' he said, with almost a scowl at the delay.

Jean stood and gazed after them as they darted from the door. 'Oh, canny, canny, down the brae!' she cried. She had not shed a tear over the parting, but her heart was heavy and sore. 'She'll repent it but once, and that will be a' her life,' she said to herself, as the black speck disappeared over the hill, 'and it's begun already. I ay said it, if that were ony satisfaction; but she never would listen to me.'

CHAPTER XLIII

THERE was no moon, and the night grew speedily dark; and the road was no smooth, level highway, but a road up hill and down dale, as was natural to the country. Stapylton was so absorbed with its difficulties that he took no notice of the little traveller whose presence could not long be concealed.

'What is it?' he said, when little Margaret with a struggle made herself visible from under the cloak.

'It is only the child,' Isabel answered in the easiest tone she could attain to, though her very lips were trembling with excitement, and resolution, and alarm. What he said was lost in the night breeze which swept past them as they flew on against it. She thought he too had taken little Margaret's presence for granted, and her heart seemed to go back with a leap to its natural place in her breast. But the fact was that Stapylton's

mind was at the moment too much occupied to have time to think of the child. When she looked up at him again, she saw that his brow was contracted, his lips firmly set together, a look of oppression and almost terror in his face.

'This confounded country of yours!' he said, 'it is bad enough in daylight, but it's horrible in the dark. Why did you keep me waiting so long at that infernal cottage-door?' But he did not seem to notice the answer Isabel made in her dismay. And they swept along through the dark with nothing visible but the pale stars in the sky, and the great shadows of the hills, and glimmer of the larger loch on the other side of the braes to which they were descending; and nothing audible but the sharp din of the horse's hoofs on the road, and Baby Margaret's little murmurs as she nestled to her mother's side. The curious oppression in Stapylton's face made Isabel, too, hold her breath, though otherwise she would have felt no alarm upon the well-known way. But past agitation had unstrung her, and the thought of the struggle to come. 'Would you give up your little bairn?' Ailie's words were still ringing in her ears, and she kept repeating to herself over and over, 'Never, oh, never, if I should die!' While this was going through her mind, Isabel, seated by her husband's side, trembled with the question, What would he think if he knew her thoughts? What might he be thinking even now, so close to her that she could not move without touching him, so far off that her profoundest skill could not fathom what was in his mind?

It was thus that they reached the first place which in their new-married life they could call home. With a relief which an hour before she could not have believed possible, Isabel placed her baby in the hands of Nelly Spence, who was waiting for them at the door.

'You'll take great care of her,' she said, whispering, as she put the child into her arms.

'Eh, aye, I'll take awfu' care of her,' was the answer.

And the young mother was glad to be thus relieved, to go to her husband, and do her best to conciliate and please him. The fire was burning brightly in the little bare dining-room, and the table spread; and Horace, still with cloudy looks, sat in a great armchair thrust back into the shadow. It was not home, but yet it was more like home than the honeymoon lodgings. It was, at least, their own house. She had come to him giving up her baby, feeling that such a sacrifice was his due; and, perhaps, she expected that some special word or look of tenderness should reward her. But it was soon evident that his mood was very far from lover-like. He burst

out when she came up to the fire and stood with her face turned towards him in the full glow of the firelight. Her agitation had roused all the dormant expression in Isabel's face. Her eyes looked larger, and were full of light and shadow. A tremulous colour went and came on her cheek. Her mouth was all trembling and eloquent with suppressed feeling, and the glimmering of the firelight gave a certain increase of effect to the whole. He did not even look at her at first, but suddenly burst out:—

‘I hate this country of yours! I always did hate it! I don't know what made me such an ass as to consent to stay. By Jove! I wonder if any woman was ever worth——’

‘What, Horace?’ she said, trying to laugh.

‘The things we do for them,’ he said. ‘You are a kind of demons with your pretty faces. You tempt us to do a thousand things that if we had our wits about us——’

‘Horace, we have surely something more than pretty faces? Is that all you care for?’ said Isabel.

‘Well, never mind,’ he said, coarsely; ‘if you were plain, you would not ask such a question; but if you had been plain, Isabel, you should never have been my wife.’

He expected her to be pleased with the rough compliment: and, pleased himself, roused up a little out of the shadow, and suffered his face to relax and looked at her as at a picture. ‘No,’ he said, ‘you should never have been my wife. I never thought, even when I admired you most in the old times, that you would have turned out so handsome, Isabel; and when I look at you I don't mind——’

‘What is it you don't mind?’

‘All you have cost me,’ he said, falling back into the shadow. ‘By Heaven that night at the opera, when I saw you dazzling—you whom I had been persuading myself to believe was only a pretty country girl. And there you were like a queen of beauty. I shall never forget how I felt that night.’

‘Oh, don't speak of it!’ she cried. ‘I cannot bear it; don't remind me of that.’

‘If I could bear it, you may,’ he said, with a certain tone of contempt; ‘but I don't mind, you are worth it all, my dear; and now let us have some dinner. I have got you in spite of everything, and at least we may be jolly to-night.’

So they sat down to their dinner, which Stapylton himself had taken the trouble to order; and not a word was said about the child. He had accepted it as a natural part of their household, she thought; and Isabel's

heart grew a little lighter with every word he spoke. He had forgotten, no doubt, all that had been said in a different mood; and she began to flatter herself it had been but a passing moment of ill-temper; and that now the child was under his roof, there would be no further comment upon it. A feverish gaiety took possession of her as she caught at this thought. She made a conscious effort to amuse him, stirring up all her dormant powers. She told him of her meeting with Ailie, and did not wince at his rude comments upon the woman he had no understanding of. She was so anxious to please him that she could have borne anything he chose to say. She was lowering to his level, though she did not know it; a certain pleasure in the fact of being able to make him laugh, and turn his thoughts from more serious matters, took possession of her. Oh, if she could only have gone on telling him stories like Scherazade, and occupying him with any romance or trifle till they had embarked on their voyage, and little Margaret under her shawl had been conveyed into the ship unnoticed! It was the first piece of practical falsehood she had ever attempted, and it had been successful beyond her hopes; and in the haste and agitation of the moment it seemed to her that this was the soundest policy, and that there was no other course before her to pursue.

'That woman was always mad,' said Stapylton, 'I could see it from the first; but, by Jove! she must be cunning, too. To get that mad fellow to marry her and make a lady of her, as they say, was the cleverest thing I know. What a fool he must have been, to be sure!'

'Oh, Horace! you don't understand Ailie,' said Isabel.

'I understand her a great deal better than you do, my dear; though I believe in your heart, if you were to tell the truth, *you* saw what she was at all along. Depend upon it, there is always some meaning in those got-up things. When I remember how you were all taken in, and expected your sister to get better too—when anybody with half an eye could see she was going as fast as she could go.'

'Oh, Horace! don't speak of that,' cried Isabel. 'They say there is something in the papers about Mr. John—something that has happened in France. There is the newspaper lying with your letters, will you open it and see?'

'Time enough for that,' he said, drawing his chair to the fire. 'By Jove! he must have been a fool—a bigger fool than even I am, to come down here and bury myself in this hole, all for the sake of you! You ought to be a good wife to me, Isabel, instead of setting up your

silly little notions. You never were as happy in all your life before, I know. You never had anyone to pet you before, and make a little idol of you. And yet you go and vex me and spoil all our plans for some foolish notion about a baby, that cares as much for the first country lass that makes a fuss over it as it does for you. Yes, it is a true bill, my darling. You know what a naughty little rebel you are. Now acknowledge that in all your life you never were so happy before?’

It would be safe to say that at this moment, with her husband's arm round her, and his eyes glowing upon her with admiration and fondness, Isabel had scarcely ever been more unhappy, more torn by painful struggles. ‘Oh, Horace!’ she cried, faintly, hiding her face in her hand. The question humiliated her. She was ashamed, mortified, offended; and at the same time stung to the heart by the contrast between the state of her feelings and his opinion of them. Happy! was there any meaning in the word? But, fortunately, no thought of this crossed Stapylton's mind. He was full of the comfort of his dinner and his rest, and the indigenous toddy which steamed by his elbow. Ease and that genial influence had mollified him, and made him complacent. He took Isabel's confusion for the evidence of a shy rapture.

‘You were always a shy little fool,’ he said, kissing her; ‘but I know you were never so happy before. Trust me to know it. You have never told me the secrets of your prison-house, but I can guess them. By Jove! you should be grateful to a man when you find yourself delivered out of that tomb, and brought safe off here, to be made a pet of. It's all very well to pretend, and to make up a pretty little scene, like that you treated me to this morning; but I know you can't care for that brat of a baby, nor put it in comparison with me.’

‘Oh, Horace, let me love my child!’ cried Isabel. ‘I will love you all the better—don't take my little one from me! I will serve you on my knees—I will study your every look, if you will but consent that I should love my own child.’

‘And what should you do if I did not consent?’ he said, with a smile. ‘You would cry very prettily, Isabel, I know, and make a scene as all women do, but you'd give in at the end. Now, why not give in at the beginning, and save yourself all the trouble? Do you think there is any doubt, my love, who would conquer at the last?’

‘Yes,’ she said, in a voice scarcely audible, trying to free herself from his arms. ‘There is a doubt—for I might die.’

‘What has your dying to do with it? No, my love.

You'll give in to me and do your duty, and we'll be as happy as the day is long,' he said, and with another kiss let her go free. 'Now give me the paper, and I'll read you the news. All sorts of things have been happening, and we have been too happy to mind; but now, you know, it is time to think of our duties, now we've come back to the world.'

CHAPTER XLIV

A DAY or two passed in idleness, not unlike the honeymoon idleness of Ranza Bay. Stapylton lounged out and saw the steamer come and go, and lounged back again with nothing to occupy him, sometimes lavishing caresses upon his wife, sometimes sullen to her, complaining of the delay and the time he was losing, and of being buried alive in 'such a hole as this.'

One morning, about a week after their establishment at Kilcranion, a message came to Isabel from Janet Macfarlane, begging her to go to Ailie. It was while they were seated at breakfast that the message arrived. 'Eelin,' the 'lass' who had been witness of the first meeting between Mrs. Lothian and her former lover, was Janet's messenger. 'Eh, mem, there's word frae Ardnamore,' said the young woman; 'you'll have heard of a' that's come and gone. Eh, I would have brought ye the paper if I had thought ye didna ken. He's joined thae radicals that are ay plotting; and it was some awful plan to blow up the king. And Ardnamore he's been blown up himself instead, and it's no thought he'll live. And there's been letters. You wouldna have thought the mistress was that taken up with him, when he was here; but she's ta'en her bed, and we dinna ken what to do. And auld Janet—I'm meaning Mrs. Macfarlane—has awfu' confidence in you. If you were to come, she thinks maybe Ailie—eh, Gude forgive me, I'm meaning the mistress—would mind what you would say.'

'If you'll wait a little, Helen,' said Isabel, 'I will see what I can do.' She went back to her husband with a little excitement. 'You never told me,' she said, 'that there was something in the papers about Mr. John. And now they say he is dying, and I am sent for to Ailie. Poor Ailie! she scarcely said good-bye to him when he went away; and she will feel it now. Horace, will you get the gig and drive me over the hill, or must I wait for the boat?'

'Neither the one nor the other!' he said. 'Why should you go to every Ailie in the country-side when they send

for you? Nonsense! You have no official position now, Isabel. You are my wife, and I won't have you go!

'But, Horace, I must!' said Isabel, quite unsuspecting that this was the voice of authority. 'Poor Ailie! I had to do with her marriage, though I did not wish it—and I was there when he went away. And I am Margaret's sister. There is nobody she will speak to like me. I will stay as short a time as possible, but I could not refuse to go.'

'By Jove! but you shall refuse to go,' he said, 'when I say it. If that is what you think your duty, it is not my view. Tell the woman I'll see her at Jericho first! My wife trotting about the country to every fool that sends for her! No, no. Don't say anything, Isabel. I tell you, you shan't go.'

She stood gazing at him with amazement so complete that there was no room for any other feeling. Obedience after this fashion had never so much as entered into Isabel's conception of the duties of a wife. Her mind was incapable of grasping this strangest new idea. 'I am sorry you don't like it,' she said; 'but, Horace, you know—I can't refuse.'

'I don't know anything of the sort,' he said; 'you *shall* refuse. Here, Jenny, Mary—whatever your name is—Mrs. Stapylton can't come. Do you hear? Tell your mistress, or whoever it was that sent you; she has got something else to do than dance attendance on the parish now. Mrs. Stapylton is not going; do you hear? Now, take yourself off and shut the door!'

'If the leddy will tell me herself,' said Eelin, standing her ground. Cæsarism of this description was unknown on Loch Diarmid, and naturally the very sight of a rampant husband awoke the spirit of the female messenger. 'Oh, mistress,' she added, turning with sudden softening to Isabel, who sat dumb with crimson cheeks and downcast eyes, 'dinna forsake us in our trouble. There is no one on a' the Loch that can be of any help to us but you.'

'Go ben to the kitchen and get a cup of tea after your long walk,' said Isabel; 'and I will come and speak to you, Helen. Go now and sit down and rest.'

Her voice was very low, she did not raise her eyes; but the woman understood and had compassion, and obeyed her without a word. A sudden harsh assumption of authority is a dangerous matter in any relationship, and perhaps most dangerous of all in that difficult transition from the love-dream to the ordinary conditions of life. Isabel's proud and delicate spirit had never yet received so strange a shock. She sat dumb for the

moment, quivering so painfully with the blow that she was unable to speak.

'You may say what you like to her besides,' said Stapylton; 'but this you must just make up your mind to say, my love—that you shan't go.'

There was a certain air of smiling insolence in the young man's face. He was making his first experiment in the matter of sovereignty—beginning as he meant to end, he would have said.

'Is this how it is to be?' said Isabel, with quivering lips. 'I—don't understand. It never came into my mind before. Oh, Horace, is this how it is to be between us? It could never be any pleasure to me to do what you don't like; but is it to be you who are to judge always, and never me?'

'Didn't you promise to obey me, you little rebel?' he said, still with artificial playfulness; 'and, of course, I mean to be obeyed. You may trust me not to give up my right.'

'But not as a baby obeys,' said Isabel, in a voice which was scarcely audible.

He got up with a laugh which jarred on all her excited nerves.

'I don't mind how you make it out,' he said; 'but I mean you to do what I like, and for this once you had better make up your mind. You shan't go!'

It was at this moment—moved by what evil suggestion it is impossible to tell—that Nelly Spence, who had gradually been growing to a fever point of indignation at the little notice taken of her baby, suddenly opened the door of the room in which such a momentous discussion was going on. They both turned round, and for a moment nothing was visible; then little Margaret, staggering in her first baby run, came swift and unsteady through the open door, her attendant appearing behind her, stretching out sheltering arms. 'She's walking!' said Nelly, with a shriek of delight. And Isabel, for the moment forgetting all her wounds, gave a cry of instinctive joy, and, turning round, held out her arms. Stapylton turned away with an oath. He went to the window, turning his back on the scene—so pretty a scene!—the young mother melting into a sudden transport out of her first hard passage of beginning life; the young nurse, half frantic with exultation, the little fairy creature rushing into the arms held out for it. Never was happy household yet, in which such a moment does not detach itself from the blank of years like a picture—sweet, evanescent, innocent delight! But here the bonds of nature were twisted awry. Isabel took her child into her arms with a throb of happiness, and then signed

to its nurse to go away, and turned round with a deeper pang of pain. It banished even her own humiliation out of her mind. She gazed wistfully at her husband, not knowing whether to speak to him or remain silent—longing to say, 'I will be your slave, only tolerate my child.'

'Do you want to drive me mad with that man's child?' he said, turning round upon her with a look of hatred and horror which struck her with consternation; and then went out of the room, out of the house, without another word. She saw him go rapidly past the window while she still sat thunderstruck, holding her baby. Poor Isabel! And this conflict was to last all her life.

She did not know how long she sat thus silent, with a thousand thoughts passing through her mind. She was not thinking; she was stunned, and incapable of any mental action. Her thoughts came and went independently, presenting their arguments before her like so many unseen pleaders. Little Margaret slid from her arms to the floor, and sat there playing with anything that came to hand, gurgling with sweet rills of laughter, sweet murmurs, and those attempts at words which mothers know how to translate. But she took no notice. Slowly the invisible advocates delivered their pleas, and set forth all their reasonings. There rose before her a vision of what must be done, of what it was impossible to do. She was his wife; she had counted the cost and taken the risk, and now the forfeit was required of her. The time had been when she was little Margaret's mother before all; but she had willingly, consciously, taken up another responsibility. She was his wife. Life must be transformed, must be so arranged that it should be practicable with him and not another. Isabel took the baby up from the floor and pressed it to her heart with a despair which could find no words. Thus it must be. She had drawn her lot with her eyes open, knowing she must pay some hard price for it, though not this price. The decision to be made was so bitter and so terrible that it quenched down even her impetuous, passionate nature. She could not be angry as she would have been had the occasion been less trivial. She was beyond anger. There was in her whole being the silence of despair.

The whole day passed over her in a hush like that which comes before a storm. She framed the softest message she could, and sent Eelin back with it, declaring that it was impossible she could come. And she occupied her mind with schemes for her baby's comfort, and for keeping some trace of her own recollection before the child when they should be parted, perhaps for ever and ever. For ever and ever—that was most likely—with

the great ocean between them, and life more bitter than any ocean. Jean would be good to the child she knew, and Miss Catherine would keep a watchful eye on her—and— Only the mother would have no part—no part in little Margaret's life. She could not shed any more tears, they were all dried up, scorched up out of her eyes; but she sat all day by herself, and thought, and thought. Yes, this was how it must be. Her own life was decided and settled by her own deed; and Isabel would not say even to herself what a prospect she felt to be before her. But to expose Margaret to the hatred of the man who ought to stand to her in the place of a father, to make her little life subject to such storms, to give her no happy home, full of love and tender freedom, but a nook on suffrance in the house of 'another family'—better let the mother's heart break once for all, and the child be happy, caressed, above all criticism. Thus it must be.

When Stapylton returned that evening his mood was changed. Perhaps he was ashamed, and felt that he had gone too far. Perhaps it was a natural revulsion towards the wife he was still so fond of, that he was determined to have her all to himself. He never mentioned little Margaret or made any reference to her, but he was very tender to Isabel. 'I am an ill-tempered fellow,' he went so far as to say; 'and if I make myself disagreeable sometimes, my Isabel must forgive me.' And Isabel, for her part, was worn out; much emotion had worn her as great fatigue might have done. She yielded her soul to the sweetness when it came. She laid her head on his shoulder when he drew her to him, and cried, and despaired, and yet was consoled.

'I am going to Maryburgh fair,' he said to her next morning. 'Smeaton has written to me to fetch away the cattle I bought. But I don't want them now; so I must sell them if I can. I shall be back by the last steamer at dusk.'

'Then that is farewell to all your thoughts of settling here?'

'Farewell was said long ago,' he said, 'unless, indeed, there was something very tempting. No, no, don't look at me so eagerly; I don't mean to raise any hopes—America is the place for you and me. But, of course, if there was any great temptation——'

'Oh, Horace, if I might hope it would be so'—cried Isabel, with her heart leaping to her mouth.

'Well, well, wait and see what will happen,' he said cheerfully; and in that sudden gleam of comfort she hung about him, feeling all her fears and sorrows melt away like mists in the sunshine. She kissed him with her very heart on her lips before he left her. Isabel had

been bred in all the reticence of a grave Scottish maiden; her kisses were few, and very rarely bestowed, but in this moment of revulsion, her heart smote her for all the hard things she had been thinking. 'Dear Horace!' she said, hanging about him, 'I am always so hasty; but every day I will know you better.'

'And every day you grow sweeter,' he said with a lover's looks—and thus they parted; he to the boat which should carry him to Maryburgh, she to little Margaret's room to dance her baby, and sing all manner of joyful ditties to the child. 'Oh, my bonnie darling, shall I keep you after all?' was the burden of Isabel's gladness. She sang the words over and over in her joy, as if they had been the *refrain* of a song; and little Margaret crowed and clapped her baby hands in reply, and the whole was like the blessed awaking from a bad dream.

When Isabel had exhausted herself with enjoyment, she sat down at length, having ordered the daintiest dinner she could contrive for his comfort when he should return, and began to her wifely work, sewing on buttons and putting her husband's 'things' in order. It was pleasant to be engaged about his 'things' at such a moment. She said to herself that she had done him injustice, and her heart in the revulsion went back to him with a warmth beyond the fervency even of her first love. The cloud had blown past—surely for ever. She had misconceived him altogether. While she had supposed him to be so harsh and unsympathetic, was it not evident that all the time he had been overcoming his own prepossessions, bringing himself to acquiescence in her desires? Her heart uttered confessions of her sin against him, and praises of his goodness, while she put the buttons on his shirts. And little Margaret played at her feet, and the sunshine came in and lighted on the baby's golden head, and for almost the first time since her marriage Isabel's heart was light, and her happiness was unclouded as the day.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon when the messenger whom Stapylton had sent from Maryburgh reached the house. It was one of the men upon the pier, whom Isabel knew. He brought her a little note, written in pencil, from her husband, sending the key of a desk of his which he always kept locked.

'I want some money,' Stapylton wrote. 'I see something here I can buy with advantage, but I have not money enough. Open the right-hand drawer above the pigeon-hole; be sure you don't touch anything else—and send me a pocket-book you will find in it. Remember not to touch anything else, for there are things in it which belong to other people, and I can't

have my papers interfered with. Lock it up again as soon as you have taken out the pocket-book, and send me back the key.'

Isabel was a little startled by the note, anticipating evil at the sight of it, as women instinctively do. And she was a little fluttered by the haste of the messenger, who had to return by the boat in half an hour, and was very pressing. She gave little Margaret over to Nelly Spence, and put aside her work and hastened upstairs to her room where the desk was. The very fact of his wishing to buy something, whatever it might be, was an additional proof that he did not mean to go away, but was thinking in earnest of remaining at home. She ran lightly upstairs, and went to the old-fashioned brass-bound desk which had so often roused her curiosity. She did not remember ever to have seen him open it. It had belonged to his grandfather, he had once told her, and had secret drawers in it, and all kinds of wonders. It was, however, commonplace enough when it was opened. One side folded down to form the slope for writing, and the other was filled with a little range of drawers exactly alike. The right-hand one, however, was quite unmistakable; the pigeon-hole below was clear of papers, and distinguished it from all the rest. But it was stiff, and cost Isabel a great deal of trouble to open it. She had to pull and pull till the little ivory knob came off, and then her task was more difficult than ever. While she was trying her best to get it open, with the thought in her mind that the messenger was waiting all the time, and the boat ready to start, and her husband fretting for the man's arrival, her finger suddenly caught something below, which came out with a little rush and click as of a spring. It came upon her hand and hurt it, which was the first thing that attracted her attention. Then it occurred to her that she might now get a better hold upon her obstinate drawer; and putting her hand in behind, she at length pulled it out triumphantly, and found the pocket-book, the object of her search. No curiosity was in Isabel's mind as to the other contents of the desk. She shut the drawer hastily, and only then looked at the smaller one below, which she had involuntarily opened. It would not push back again in haste like the other. She stooped over it to adjust the spring, thinking of nothing. Next moment she uttered a low cry of horror. The pocket-book fell out of her hand on the floor. She stood paralysed—immovable; her lips dropping apart like the lips of an idiot, her face blanched as by a sudden whisper of Death.

'I must go!' said the man below stairs; 'he'll be that rampaging I'll no daur face him. Gang up the stair,

my woman, and ask the mistress if I'm to bide here a' day.'

'The boat's ay late,' said the servant-woman out of the kitchen. 'Take patience, man; she'll no keep you waiting, unless there's some reason for it; and I'm busy wi' my cakes, and canna stir, rampage as muckle as ye please.'

'Then, lassie, gang you,' said Stapyhton's messenger. 'She's been half an hour up the stair—half an hour, as I'm a sinner!—and her man cursing and swearing a' the time on Maryburgh pier. Rise up and ask, like a bonnie lass! Tell her—answer or no answer—I maun away.'

'Oh, aye, I'll gang,' said Nelly Spence; 'but give me my wean. Now she's walking she's mair trouble than when she was carried. She's away, half way down the passage before ye ken.'

'Rin first and speak after,' said the man. 'Lord, woman, maun I gang up the stair to the mistress mysel?'

Thus stimulated, Nelly Spence, with little Margaret in her arms, went upstairs to the bedroom door. She knocked, but there was no answer. She called softly, then louder, getting frightened; finally, she opened the door and looked in. Isabel was standing in the same attitude, like a creature suddenly congealed into ice or snow. Her side face, which was visible to Nelly, was so ghastly white, and so like the face of an idiot, that the girl was dumb with panic. She went quickly forward, making a noise which at last seemed to catch Isabel's ear. Her action, then, was as extraordinary as her looks had been. She turned suddenly round, and placed herself between the new-comer and the open desk, going back upon the latter and putting her hands behind her, as if to conceal it.

'What do you want?' poor Nelly supposed her to say; but it was a babble, instead of words. She was like the old people who were paralysed.

'Oh, Isabel,' cried Nelly, in her terror forgetting all conventional rules of respect, 'Oh, Isabel, dinna look at me like that! I'll rin for the doctor. You've had a stroke!'

'No!' Isabel said, with an imperative gesture; and then, though her look did not change, she struggled into utterance.

'What do you want—what is it?' she said.

'It's the man,' cried Nelly; 'he's wanting his answer. But, oh, you're fitter to be in your bed. I'll rin for the doctor, and tell him you're no able. Oh, what will we do?—a young thing like you!'

'Tell him,' said Isabel, regaining her voice by degrees — 'to tell—Mr. Stapyhton—there's no answer. You hear'

me, Nelly: there is—no answer. That is what he is to say.'

'But, eh,' said Nelly, with anxious kindliness, 'he'll be awfu' angry. If you would let me help you, and find it, whatever it was——'

'Hold your peace!' said Isabel, harshly. 'Go and tell him. There is—no answer. And leave me to myself. I have something here I want to do.'

'Is she going to kill herself? Does she want him to kill her?' Nelly said, talking to herself as she went down the stair. When she was gone, Isabel, with unsteady step, came across the room and locked the door. She caught a glimpse of herself in the glass as she passed, and wondered vaguely who it was. Then she went back to the open desk, and took out the little secret drawer, and carried it, staggering as she went, to the window. There was but one thing in it: a little broach set round with pearls, with hair in the centre, attached to a long gold pin. Adhering to the pin were still some ragged threads of the cambric in which Isabel, with her own hands, had placed it one June morning, not yet two years ago. This was the treasure shut carefully away in Horace Stapylton's secret drawer.

CHAPTER XLV

THERE are times when a great shock paralyses the whole being, and makes it incapable of action; and there are other circumstances under which it stimulates every power, sends the blood coursing to the heart, and fills the mind with such promptitude of despair, as renders thought unnecessary. At this awful moment both these effects were produced on Isabel. She was paralysed. The sight of that terrible token changed her into stone. The convulsive trembling of her figure steadied gradually as she stood by the window looking at that terrible evidence of what had happened to her; and, as it did so, a sudden, swift, indescribable sense of what she had to do swept through her mind—not what she had to suffer; that was swept out of sight for the moment; besides she was dead, and there was no sense of suffering in her; all she was conscious of was what she had to do.

She took the fatal little drawer first, and locked it up in a box of her own, but walked over the pocket-book on the floor in utter unconsciousness, having lost perception of everything that did not concern the one frightful subject-matter of her thoughts. Then, with hasty hands, she put on her bonnet and cloak, and hurried out to

little Margaret's room, leaving Stapylton's desk open. She took the baby out of Nelly Spence's arms, and began to put on its out-door dress. She had got over her trembling, but her face was ashy white, paler than Nelly had ever seen any living creature before. 'Oh, where are ye going? Oh, let me take the wean! Oh, mistress, ye're no fit to be out of your bed!' wailed Nelly in her consternation. Isabel made no reply. She was even so far mistress of herself as to be able to smile a ghastly smile, and nod her head at the baby as she put on its wraps. 'I shall be back before—dinner,' she said as she went away. 'Before dinner!' Could anything be more horrible than to think of the household table, the common daily use and wont, in face of such a tragical conclusion? But Isabel took no note of her own words. She took the child in her arms; she repeated the same explanation to the maid in the kitchen; and, passing out, took the way across the hill to Loch Diarmid. Little Margaret, in her infant unconsciousness, babbled sweetly over her mother's shoulder, pulling Isabel's veil and bonnet with her dimpled hands, and smiling radiantly at the unaccustomed pleasure. Her little voice ran on, with now and then a half-articulate word, in broken rills of baby exclamation, wonder, delight, amusement—the little, loving, broken monologue, which is so sweet to kindred ears; and Isabel, without a look round her, without a pause, pressed on. It was a lonely, long, dreary road, over the hill. She had never carried such a burden before, and the baby was lively and happy, and not to be kept quiet. The only conscious thought in the mother's mind was, Oh, if she would but go to sleep, and relieve the tired arms in which she danced and frolicked. Once or twice Isabel sat down for a moment on the roadside, but dared not prolong her rest, she had so much—so much to do. The early winter twilight was fading when she went in breathless to the Glebe Cottage, and sank, without a word, into the great old high-backed chair in the kitchen. Jean, with joy and wonder, and then with wonder and consternation, rushed forward to take the child, and overwhelmed her with welcome and astonishment. 'Eh, my wee darling—eh, Isabel, my bonnie woman! Where have ye come from so sudden? There's nae boat at this hour!' Jean said in her amaze. And then the delight of the child's return fortunately occupied her, and gave Isabel a moment's breathing-time. Breathless, fainting, weary to death, she lay back in the great chair. Her arms ached, her head ached, her heart was panting with the effort for breath. She seemed to require rest only—nothing but rest. The warmth of the fire, the quiet, the familiar objects round her, lulled her

as if they had been singing a cradle-song. A confused longing came over her to end here and stay, and go no farther. Alas, how was she ever, ever to retrace that weary, darkling path over the hills!

'You've never walkit all the way?' cried Jean at last. 'It's enough to have killed you, Isabel, my woman! You're awfu' white, and ye dinna say a word. Is there anything ails ye? and what has brought ye walking with the wean ower the hills? Eh, I'm feared something's happened! Bide a moment, my bonnie woman, till I get you a glass of sherry wine!'

The wine restored Isabel a little to herself. It brought back the energy which had begun to fail her. 'I have brought you Margaret,' she said. 'It is nothing. I could have sent Nelly, of course, but it was—pleasanter—I mean I liked better—to bring her myself. She is fond of you—you'll be very, very good to her—whatever happens!'

'Oh, Isabel! what should happen?' cried Jean.

'One never knows,' said Isabel, drearily. 'That is not what I meant to say; I mean, you'll take great care of my baby; she is all I have. Except for her, what do I care what happens? Nelly will come, you know, with her things. I will send her as soon as I get—home.'

'But, my bonnie woman, there's no boat to-night,' cried Jean. 'Walk! na, I would never hear of that. Ye canna walk a' the way to Kilcranion ower the hills.'

'I must go at once,' said Isabel. And then, again, the thought, Must she go? came over her. Could not she stay here in her own house, where she had taken refuge? Were there not her old friends, who would arrange everything for her? A sudden sickening of heart came over her; and yet her whole being was so confused, that she was not sure whether it was the mere walk, or what would come after that walk, which overwhelmed her most.

'Oh, if you would hide me!—Oh, if ye would take me away!' she cried, in the misery of her soul.

'Hide ye! take ye away! Oh, Isabel, has it come to this? Aye, I'll hide ye—aye, I'll defend ye!' cried Jean, roused up to sudden wrath. 'Trust to me, my bonnie woman. Nae man, were he the king, shall come ram-paging here!'

These very words, which expressed the deepest evil Jean could dream of, and which yet were so trifling, so shallow, compared to the facts, awoke Isabel fully to a sense of her position. She rose up, composing herself as best she could.

'Hush!' she said. 'I must go back. I was speaking—like a fool. I have a great deal to do. The only thing

is, that you'll take care of little Margaret; you'll never let her out of your sight. My bonnie darling! let me kiss her, and I'll go.'

'No this night—oh, no this night!' cried Jean. 'Ye'll drop down on the hill, ye'll be that wearied; it's enough to be your death.'

'That would be the best of all!' said Isabel under her breath. When she was in movement she was not conscious how weary she was; but as she stood thus, with the child holding out its arms to her, with the old home wooing her, with a possibility, it might be, of escape and flight thus presenting itself before her, her limbs ached, her heart failed. But no, no; that which had to be done could be done only by herself.

'I must be going now,' she said, faintly. 'Don't ask me any questions. Let me kiss her once again. Oh, you've been a kind woman to Margaret and me! Promise me that you'll never—never forsake my little bairn!'

'Isabel, dinna break my heart. How could I forsake her, the darling, that was born into my very arms?'

'And you'll never let her out of your sight?' said Isabel. She was gone again before Jean could say another word. When she rushed, with the child in her arms, to the door, the young mother was already almost out of call, speeding up the hill-side like a shadow. The sun had set even beyond the western hills, and had been out of sight here at the Glebe for three-quarters of an hour. 'Though it's longer light on the other side of the hill, it'll be dark night before she gets home,' said Jean to herself. 'Oh, did I no ay say it was to her destruction she was taking that English lad?' She stood and watched as long as the retreating figure was visible, with thoughts of rushing after her, of appealing to Miss Catherine or the Dominie, or someone who could aid. 'But wha can interfere between man and wife?' Jean said to herself, with homely wisdom, shaking her head as she went back to her fireside with the child who had been thus suddenly dropped into her arms. 'My wee pet! at least she may be easy in her mind about you,' she said, with tears, kissing the little creature, who could give no explanation; and thus accepted the mystery on which, for this night at least, it appeared no light could be thrown.

Isabel had reached the middle of her homeward course before she awoke to any sort of consciousness of what was before her. Was it on such another night as this—darker still, more cloudy and stormy—that one man had struck another down, and wrenched from his breast that little token of innocent affection and tragic misery? O God! could it be? Then she saw herself at the opera,

with that fatal eye upon her; she recalled the sense of something malign regarding her, of which she had been conscious in the Manse garden the night before the minister's death. These recollections and impressions came one by one, each thrusting her through with a sharper and a sharper dart. She tried to escape from them—to think what she ought to do. Something there was that must be done. She was going back to him—her husband, her husband's slayer—to him who had dared to take her into his arms, knowing the awful ghost that stood between them. Isabel hid her face, as if some accusing eye had looked at her, and cried aloud, in the agony of her shame. How was she polluted!—she who was Margaret's mother and the minister's wife! He had come to her with that blood on his hand, knowing his own guilt, and plucked her like a flower—taken her in spite of herself—made her his, to bear his name, and bound her to him for ever and ever. She writhed upon that sword as she sat and rocked herself on the dark wayside. It seemed to her as if some cruel, avenging angel—as if God Himself—had put the bitter weapon through her heart, and held it there, despite her struggles, keeping her to a sense of the deepness of her misery, preventing her from thinking rather what she must do. What was she to do? Oh, if she could only think of that question, instead of writhing and aching, and stabbing herself through and through with this!

But the night grew darker, and the wind moaned louder, and Isabel started with a thrill of natural terror. She stood on the highest point of the road, feeling that there was still a choice before her, for one wild moment. She might turn, and fly back to the Glebe even now. She might shut fast the doors, and send for her friends, and barricade herself from the approach of the murderer; her husband's murderer—that was what he was! She stood with her breath coming in sobs against the wind, all alone in Heaven and earth, to make her decision. Oh! she could so easily gather a body-guard to defend her!—friends that would hold her fast, and her baby, and keep her from all fear. What need had she to go back, to see his dreadful murderer's face—to be touched by the hands which—— Isabel turned and made a rush downwards on the side of Loch Diarmid to her safe and silent home. Then she paused, and painfully retraced her steps. Her heart was gashed and cut in two by that awful sword, which God would not withdraw for a moment. She was the wife at once of the slayer and the slain. God help her! If she sent for her friends to avenge her husband, would not that be to kill her husband? Kill her husband! She walked up and down

like a wild creature on the top of the hill. The clouds seemed to be drooping over her, so near they rolled in their great, tumultuous waves; big drops of rain fell from their skirts, like something cast at her out of the heavens. The storm was rising from Loch Diarmid as if to hunt her before it down to the gloomy shores of Loch Goil. Over there, in the west, there was a pale glimmer that seemed to direct her—where? To him who, no doubt, was now waiting for her—the man whose name she bore—whose wife she was; her first love—her worst enemy. Was she to devote herself to him, loathing him as she did? Was she to denounce him, loving him as she did? What, oh! what—was there no counsel in Heaven or earth?—was she to do?

When she arrived at the house Isabel was drenched with the torrent of rain which had swept her before it down the dark slope of the hill. The blast had been so violent, and the feverish strength of excitement was so great in her, that she had made up for all the time she had lost on the summit by the swiftness of the descent. And when she reached home she found that her husband had not yet returned. 'The boat's no in yet,' said the maid from the kitchen; 'and, oh! mem, but you're wet; you'll have time to change your wet things afore the maister can be back.'

'And where's the bairn?' said Nelly, open-mouthed.

'You must pack up all her things,' said Isabel, collecting all her powers, 'and take them on to the Glebe. I left her at the Glebe with—Mrs Diarmid. If it is too late to-night go to-morrow morning. I don't think I shall have her here again.'

The maids were in a panic, alarmed for her sanity. They looked at her with suspicious looks. 'Mrs. Stapylton,' said Nelly, with an effort for breath, 'you're sure you ken what you're saying. Oh! dinna be angry, if you're *yoursel*. You're sure you've done the wean no harm?'

'Me! harm my darling!' said Isabel, incredulous that the fear could be real; and then a blaze of momentary indignation came to her aid. 'Go to your work both of you,' she said; 'and don't take it upon you to criticise what I do. Stand aside, Nelly, I am going upstairs.'

They let her pass them with momentary bewilderment, not knowing what to do. 'But I'll tell him as soon as he comes in,' said the elder woman; 'a man ought to know.'

'You'll do nothing of the kind,' said Nelly, who had a spirit. 'She's mair like a living creature now, and no so like a ghost. Bide, and let him find out for himself.'

'But, woman, the bairn!'

'Never you mind the bairn. She's safe in the Glebe, I dinna doubt, with Jean. They've had some quarrel about her,' said Nelly, with precocious insight, 'and this is the upshot. Let us haud our tongues, and see what will come o' 't. Eh, woman! a'boddy said ill would come o' 't; and ye see it was true.'

'As she has made her bed so must she lie,' said the other, sententiously; and she went back to her kitchen to see after the dinner, which was being prepared all the same, whatever tragedies might come to pass. Nelly stole upstairs after Isabel; but dared not follow her to her room, much as she longed to do so; and lights began to be visible in the windows, and everything was made ready for the husband's coming home.

Isabel had come to herself; her thoughts had lulled as the wind lulled, for no reason she knew of—perhaps out of weariness. When she went into her room she perceived the desk standing open, the pocket-book lying on the floor; and had so much possession of herself as to put them away, restoring the book to its place and closing the desk. She could do this with a certain calm, feeling as if her discovery had been made years ago, and since then she had had time to face the idea and accustom herself to it. She took off her wet gown, and dressed herself as usual. All this she did mechanically, in a sudden hush, scarcely thinking, scarcely feeling anything. When she heard his step coming to the door there rose within her a tempest just as sudden. Should she go down to meet him, or let him come here? Should she wait till he assailed her, or should she announce her awful discovery at once? None of these questions could Isabel answer for herself. She had to act mechanically, not knowing in one moment what she would do the next. He came in with an angry inquiry about 'your mistress,' which she could hear where she was. His voice was louder than usual; his very step betrayed irritation. But what was his irritation now to her? It even struck her with a curious sense of wonder that he could take the trouble to be moved by trifling causes to trifling passion—he who, as he and she knew—— Mechanically still, and quite suddenly, as if some spring had been touched in her of which she was unconscious, she went down, and went into the room. He had placed himself with his back to the fire, full of wrath, which was evidently ready to burst forth the moment she entered. The table was spread for dinner. An air of homely comfort was about the place; the light was dim, to be sure—but it was as much as they were used to; and the candles brightened the white-covered table with its gleams of reflection, and the ruddy, quivering firelight filled the

room. All these calm details of ordinary life encircled the two at this dreadful moment with that hypocrisy of nature which cloaks over the fiercest passion; and in the kitchen the dinner was preparing, not without much serious anxiety on the part of the maid lest the fish should be spoiled; for Stapylton was 'very particular' about his dinner, and prompt to wrath when anything impaired its perfection.

'Well,' he said, when Isabel came into the room, 'I hope you have something to say for yourself. What did you mean by sending me such a message to-day? I wonder if you are mad, or if it is only pride and obstinacy. No answer? How dared you, when I had sent you my directions, send back such a message to me?'

'Because I was stunned,' she said, 'and did not know what I was saying. Let us not speak of it till you have eaten. Wait till then. I have much—much—to say.'

'Much to say!—a great deal too much I don't doubt,' he said; 'if you think this sort of thing will do for me, you are mistaken, Isabel. You may as well know at once. I am not the man to be trifled with. My wife must obey me—do you understand? I can't have two wills in my house. My wife must obey me!' he went on, striking his hand against the table. 'I have borne as much of your self-will as I mean to bear. My wife must have no will but mine.'

Isabel looked at him as from some height of knowledge, feeling no movement of anger, no irritation at his words. Oh! to think he should be occupied about matters so trifling at a moment so terrible! To get his wife to obey him! Could he care for that, when this life was over, blasted in a moment, and nothing remained for either of them but a blank existence of despair? Her heart bled for him, making himself angry thus at the merest trifles, not knowing what was to come.

'The dinner is coming,' she said, wondering at herself that she could form the words, 'and the woman will be in the room. Would you wait till it is over? And you must want food and support,' she added, with an ineffable pity. It was not the pity of love. It was the compassion with which she might have fortified a criminal with food and wine, before telling him the awful news of his approaching execution—a human sentiment of pity for a weak creature in unconscious peril, about to be strained to the utmost, and unaware of it. He gave her an angry look, to see what she meant, but could not divine it, so wrapt was she in the unconscious elevation and tragic seriousness of the crisis. He did not know what

a crisis it was. And he could not understand the strange superiority of her calm.

‘And then the inconsistency of it,’ he said, moodily placing himself at the head of the table. ‘You pretend to want me to stay, and when I begin to entertain the idea, and was actually in treaty for some land, you step in, in your perversity, and break it off by disobeying my orders. What did you mean by it? What reason could you have? By Jove! if I had gone off at once and never come near you again, it would have served you right.’

Oh! if he had done so, Isabel murmured within herself; but the servant was in the room, the dinner being placed on the table, and nothing more was practicable. She sat there happily concealed by the cover of the dish placed before her, and made motions as though she were eating, and listened to all his grumbling over the indifferent meal. The fish was spoiled; the meat was badly roasted; the vegetables were uneatable. ‘If you would give a little more attention to this sort of thing, and waste less time over that precious baby, it would be more to the purpose,’ he said, ‘that woman is an idiot; so are all these Scotch women; and, by Jove! I was the greatest idiot of all to come and settle myself down here.’ Isabel made no answer. That he should be on such a brink, and yet be disturbed by the arrangement of the grasses on the edge of the precipice! She had no inclination to reply to him, or to take offence. She gazed at him across the table wistfully, with a compassion that was almost tender, and yet felt she could not go to him, could not touch him, or bear his touch, not for all the world.

Then there came the moment when the table was cleared and the door closed, and they sat looking at each other with the two candles lighting the little white space between them. There was perfect quiet in the house. The maids were in the kitchen, frightened, not knowing what might happen, with the door shut between them and their master and mistress. Outside, the little world was hushed; not a sound, except an occasional blast of rain on the windows, or melancholy splash of the Loch on the beach, breaking the utter silence; still as the grave, which seemed to rise up between the two as they looked at each other in the pause before the storm.

‘Well?’ said Stapylton.

Isabel had made no preparation of what she was to say. She did not know what words would come to her lips. She felt herself passive, not so much an actor as the spectator of this scene. The only thing she had done was to bring down with her, wrapped in her handkerchief, the little secret drawer of his desk containing the awful

token she had found. When he looked across at her, demanding with contemptuous defiance her apology or explanation, she gazed back at him for a moment without a word to say. Words would not come to her aid. She took up her enclosure and unfolded it with trembling hands. She began to tremble over all her frame, even to her lips, which refused to move articulately. He sat looking on unsuspecting, surprised, and scornful, while she fumbled with the handkerchief. Then she rose up and held it out to him. Her face was as pale as death; her eyes dilated; her hands, in both of which she held it, shaking wildly. 'Look what I found!' she cried, with her eyes fixed upon him. They were the only things steady about her. Her voice was inarticulate; her arms powerless. All her life had retreated into her eyes.

He sprang up to his feet at the same moment, and swore a great oath, bending over the table to see what it was. Then he fell back in his chair again, as pale as she was, trembling as she did. He was taken by surprise. 'Good God, Isabel!' he said, 'Good God, Isabel!' stumbling at the words almost as she did, 'what do you mean?'

'Look, and see!' cried Isabel, with her lips suddenly opened, 'look and see! oh, man! was there no other woman in the world that you should make me vile and make me miserable? Was there no other spot in the world, that you should come to shed blood here? You had eaten his bread and drunk his cup. You had taken my heart's love and the flower of my youth. Could you not have been content? We were thinking you no harm, doing you no harm—and ye came and killed my man, my blessed man! And even that was enough. What harm was I doing you, a lone creature with my bairn, that you should come again and pollute me, and put his blood on me? Oh, look and see! Ye took me to your arms with that horror in your mind. How dared you do it, Horace Stapylton? How dared you put yourself with that blood upon you, between the dead and me?'

He had recoiled and shrunk away from her, pushing back his chair. He had been so taken by surprise that his very wits failed him. 'For God's sake, don't scream at me,' he cried, with a thrill of terror. 'Do you know they are listening? For God's sake, woman, speak low, whatever you have to say.'

Then she gave a sudden low cry, and sank back into her seat. She had not said it to herself. She had never permitted herself to think it; and yet at the bottom of her heart there had been a hope that he would deny, that somehow he might be able to disprove even what that silent witness said. But he had not attempted to

deny it—it was all true, true! And she lived and he lived, with *that* between them. She could not stand, her limbs failed her; but she kept her hand upon that terrible evidence of his guilt, and kept looking at him with her dilated eyes.

‘Well,’ he said, getting up after a terrible pause, ‘so this is your story—this is what you have made up. You think you can ruin me with it—perhaps you think you can kill me. But it is all a mistake. Throw it into the fire—that is the wisest thing that can be done both for you and me.’

‘Not yet,’ said Isabel, under her breath.

‘Not yet! Do it of your own will, that will be wisest. Don’t drive me to compel you to do it,’ he said, pacing up and down; and then he came to a sudden pause before her. ‘One word, Isabel, before things go too far. You know what accusation you are bringing against me? You can’t prove it. *That* is no proof. Do you understand what I say? And more, it is not true.’

‘Oh!’ she said, clasping her hands, ‘say it is not true! Say you found it—or bought it—or—Horace, say it was not you!’

He paused a moment, gazing at her with an evident struggle going on in his mind whether to seek his own safety or to gratify his feelings. ‘I neither bought it nor found it,’ he said at last, under his breath, with a glance of fury in his eyes; and then he added with a sudden shudder, ‘but what killed him was the fall from his horse.’

‘And you—oh, tell me a lie rather—tell me a lie! You!’ cried Isabel, ‘struck an old man, a defenceless man, when he was down——?’

‘Who told you that?’ he cried, sharply. And then with another flash of fury, ‘How much more evil had he done to me?’ he exclaimed, throwing himself into his chair again with great drops of moisture standing like beads upon his forehead. And there was a pause like a lull in a storm.

Then the gust rose again, menacing and sudden. ‘You think I am making a confession,’ he said, ‘but I am doing nothing of the sort. You cannot harm me. I am safe, at least from the wife of my bosom. You can’t bear witness against your husband, though you had ten thousand proofs. Thank the law for that. If all this passion were not a pretence to start with! Was there ever a woman that quarrelled with her lover for anything he could do for her sake?’

‘For my sake!’ said Isabel, with a low cry of horror.

‘Yes, for what else? for your beauty and your love? Did I know what a cold-blooded phantom you were? I

swore to have you when I saw you by his side! Curse him! And I have had you. Do what you will, you can't alter that—you are my wife now, and not his.'

'Oh, don't make me loathe myself more than I do,' she cried, wildly. 'Don't make me more hateful than I am to myself.'

'But it is true,' he said, once more approaching her; 'you are mine, and you are harmless against me. I have had my desire, and I have disarmed my enemy. And look here, Isabel, you may as well hear reason,' he added, coming up to her and grasping her shoulder, 'you need not think of putting it into other hands. If I did *that* for your sake, what do you think I should be capable of for my own?'

She looked up and their eyes met, and they gazed at each other for one awful moment—he like a tiger ready to spring—she pale and resolute as an image of death.

'Of killing me,' she said, never turning her eyes from him, 'as you would kill a fly.'

'Yes,' he said; 'you are right—as I would kill a fly; if you put me in danger, or threaten my life.'

The voices of both had sunk into absolute calm. The anxious servants in the kitchen concluded that the storm was over. 'They're talking as quiet as you and me,' Nelly Spence said, with a sigh of relief, as she came back from an anxious vigil at the door. While the husband stood by his wife's chair, with his hand on her shoulder, speaking to her in a voice as quiet and subdued as if the words had been the tenderest words of love.

'It is well you should know what you have to expect,' he said. 'Submit, and I will forgive all this, and take you back to my heart. Shudder if you please, but my arms are the only ones open to you now; I will take you back, notwithstanding that you mean to betray me; but if you keep your own way, Isabel, understand that I will crush you like a fly.'

She kept looking at him, undaunted, not moving a hair-breadth back, nor changing her position. Her shrinking youth, her womanly tremor, all extinguished in an emergency more terrible than any death.

'Would I care?' she said softly, as if to herself; 'now that life itself is dead and gone? You cannot frighten me now.'

'Like a fly!' he repeated, as if he liked the image, closing his hand as if upon it; 'you, and that child you make your idol. Ah, I touch you now!'

'She is safe out of your reach,' said Isabel, though not without a tremble. And he, too, started slightly. The duel was to the death, and his opponent was unencumbered, free to beard him to the last extremity.

'What do you want?' he asked abruptly, seating himself in front of her. 'In all this I suppose you mean something. What do you want of me now?'

Then it rushed upon Isabel in a moment what she ought to say.

'You are in danger,' she said; 'you were seen that night. At any moment they might remember it was you. And I know. And never more—never, never more can you and me be as we have been. Never more! Sooner, I would die!'

The shudder in her voice thrilled him with wild irritation; but he gave no sign of it, waiting for what she had to say.

'What I want of you is, that you should leave me,' she went on. 'Leave me—that is all! Go where you were going when we met. Hear me out! I will give you everything I can give you; all I have you shall have; but save yourself, Horace, and go.'

'Is it for me you are thinking?' he said; and suddenly his heart melted, and he tried to take her hand.

'Let me be! oh, let me be!' cried Isabel, shrinking from him. 'It is for you, too. How could we live and face each other, now I know? I would speak; it would burn out my heart, till, sleeping or waking, I would speak. And—they—would remember it was you. But never will I breathe your name when you are gone. Never will I say a word—never one word of blame. And I will—forgive you!' she said, with a sudden cry.

She was capable of no more.

The servants, hearing no sound that alarmed them, began to move about in the house going to bed. The sound of the door being locked, and the shutters closed, roused the two from their deadly argument. After a while, one of the women came in to close the windows for the night, and see if anything more was wanted. This sudden breaking in of the ordinary and commonplace intensified beyond all power of description the tragic misery of the scene. It might have lasted through the whole night but for that. It might have led to any horrible conclusion. Isabel rose and went up to him, while the maid barred and bolted, and made all fast. 'I have said all I have to say,' she whispered in his ear with white, quivering lips. 'Now, it is in your hands.'

It never occurred to him that these were her last words. When he looked up from his moody reverie and found her gone, it did not even strike him as strange. He followed her upstairs slowly after an interval of thought. The room was empty, a light burning, his pocket-book lying on the table, and all traces of his wife gone. The house was all silent, dark, and motionless. Then for

the first time horror and fear came over him. He did not dare make a commotion in that stillness, or call for her to come back to him. Whatever might happen, the woman whom he had loved after his fashion had disappeared for ever out of Stapylton's life.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE night was a winter's night—long and dark. Stapylton sat down in his solitary room, and tried to think. He would let her alone, was his first thought; he would leave her at peace. No doubt she had gone away to the baby who was her idol. She must have told him a lie when she said it was gone. But he would leave her to herself: he had plenty to think of, Heaven knew. 'It was not I that killed him,' he said to himself, as he had said a thousand times before. Oh, the intolerable night! so silent, so full of horrible suggestions; and that aching void into which all in a moment any horror might spring. He took up his candle, in his misery, and went wandering all over the house, trying every door. He went to the door of the room in which the servants had locked themselves, and heard them rustling in their beds, and whispering to each other in their panic; and he went to another door from which came no sound—'Isabel, Isabel, come back to me!' he said, and a sigh seemed to breathe through the house, but no answer came. He wanted her not so much to return to him and resume the common life, as to come and protect him at that awful moment, to keep spirits and appearances away from him. He had hours of darkness to get through, and how was he to live through them by himself? It was this panic that made him try the doors; but it sent a deeper panic into the hearts of the three women who listened to his movements in the silence. Isabel, alone in the room where her child had been, believed in her heart that he had come to kill her, as he said, and wound herself up in her misery to bear whatever she might be compelled to bear; and yet trembled and wept, in a stillness as of death.

For seven or eight awful hours of darkness this torture continued. No one closed an eye in the agitated house; and yet, save when Stapylton went or came, a horrible silence reigned in it, unbroken by any complaint or appeal for help. It was not daylight at last which aroused her from that century-long vigil—daylight did not come till about eight o'clock, when the morning was far advanced. It was the first sound of early life outside,

which came like a voice from Heaven to Isabel. When she heard it she rose up softly from the cramped position she had maintained all night, thrust up into the corner, and very quietly, with trembling hands and heart, utterly unnerved by the horrors of the night, prepared to make her escape. She could bear it no longer. She had faced the man who had threatened to kill her, with dauntless resolution, on the previous night, feeling almost that such a conclusion would be as desirable as any other. But the night had taken away all her courage and force. She trembled like a leaf and could not command herself. Before her, like a vision of Heaven, appeared that little room at the Glebe, where her child no doubt was sleeping. If she could but reach that palace of peace! Stealthily, that no sound might betray her, she bathed her hot forehead, and put up her hair, and drew her cloak round her. It was more difficult to open the door without noise, and steal down the stairs, which creaked under her, soft as her steps were. When she stepped out at last into the darkness, which was no longer night but morning, and felt the chill air on her face, and heard behind her sounds of the early world beginning to stir, a certain excitement of hope rose in Isabel's mind. She thought she had escaped.

But her husband had heard her movements, soft as they were. He was fully dressed as he had been on the previous evening, and, like her, feverish with passion and want of sleep. He took out a pistol from the box in which it reposed beside his desk. The pistol was old-fashioned as well as the desk, and he had been in the habit of calling the weapons curiosities. He charged it hurriedly in the dark, not knowing what he did, and put it in the breast-pocket of his coat, and rushed out after his wife into the rain and wind.

She was half way up the lower slope towards the Loch Diarmid road, when she heard his step behind her, and felt, with a sudden leap of all her pulses, that not yet—not yet, had she escaped her fate. It was no surprise to her when he came up and laid his hand on her shoulder; the first far-off sound of his step had made it evident to her that there was still a struggle to come.

'You are flying from me,' he said to her, breathless. 'Do you think I will let you escape from me like this without another word?'

'I was not thinking of escape,' said Isabel, faltering. 'I could not bear it longer. I could not bear it. That was all.'

'And yet you think I am to bear it,' he said, making a clutch at her arm. 'False accusations and abuse and

scorn, and desertion, and all your hard words and contempt of me. You think I am to bear it all!’

‘Alas!’ she said, ‘when did I ever show contempt of you? But, oh! let me go. What can we do but weary each other with vain words? If we had quarrelled we might talk and talk and mend it. But that which is between us is beyond help. Let me go.’

‘No, by God!’ he cried, holding her fast, ‘after the price I have paid for you. No! What is to hinder me from killing you as you say I did—*him*? I will not be left alone to think. You shall stay with me and share with me, or by God, I will make an end of you!’

Isabel felt that her last hour was come. It was so dark that she could with difficulty see his face. There was silence and blackness round them—not a human creature from whom to ask help—and if there had been a thousand, she would have asked help from none.

‘It must be as you will,’ she said, with the sudden calm of despair—‘as you will!’ and waited, wondering, would it be a knife or a bullet, or the more horrible agony of his hands and blows—his hands, which had embraced her so often—at her throat? She closed her eyes instinctively, as if the darkness was not enough, and stood waiting, waiting for the touch of the death, which was so near.

‘And you have not a word to say for yourself,’ he said, his breath burning her cheek. ‘Not a word? Have you nothing to offer me for your life?’

The bitterness of death was upon her; his grasp upon her shoulder was like iron. ‘Let it be quick!’ she said, with a shudder. ‘Maybe it’s best so—maybe it’s best.’

‘And that is all?’

‘Oh! do it and be done,’ she cried, falling at his feet, ‘or leave me living for your own sake—for your sake. Is my life worth struggling for *now*? but for yourself let me be—’

‘Is that all?’ he said again. And then drew something from his breast, and a cold mouth of iron touched Isabel’s cheek. An involuntary cry burst from her by instinct. Now it had come. Suddenly she heard a report, and started aside from the sudden flash in the darkness, and fell back, but not wounded. She had been so sure of death that her safety threw her into a convulsive fit of horror and fear; there was an awful moment in which she could not tell what had happened, if it was her who was killed or anyone. Then there was a movement, a swing of his arm—his dark shadow was still standing beside her—and the pistol was thrown high over her head, and went dashing down over the rocks,

into the black invisible Loch, which raged and beat upon the unseen shore.

'Isabel,' he said, 'give me a kiss before we part.'

Oh, awful darkness that enclosed them round and round! Oh, awful nearness and separation! Her heart melted and sunk within her at that last prayer.

'Oh, Horace, let me die!'

She would have fallen, but for his arms round her; but even at that supreme moment he did not know why she would rather have died than have been thus enveloped for the last time in his embrace. The melting of her heart, the old love rising up within her like a giant, the struggle of faithful nature which could die, but could not forsake and abandon, wrung Isabel's whole being, body and soul. But not his; he kissed her, and he let her go. He stood for a moment in the darkness before her, and then he turned and went away.

It was all over. She called after him faintly, 'Horace!' in a voice swallowed by the wind, and sank down on the cold ground, prostrate, covering her face with her hands. She could hear his steps going down the hill and count them, each echoing on her heart. It was all over. Death, and danger, and love, and strife, and happiness, had all departed from her.

It was nearly noon before Isabel, stumbling at every step, reached the Glebe Cottage, the aim she had been vaguely struggling to—was it for hours or days? She went in with her haggard face, so changed and drawn with suffering, that Jean gave a cry of terror, and did not know her. She had not even a smile for her child, nor any interest in her. 'Let me rest! Let me rest!' was all she could say. Jean put the baby down on the carpet in the parlour, and gave all her care to the young mother thus come back to her for pity and consolation. 'Ye've been caught in the storm, my lamb!' she said, tenderly. But Isabel gave no explanation. She suffered herself to be undressed and laid in her own room—the little chamber she had occupied for the greater part of her life. Nothing but a murmur of thanks, or a sudden shudder, or a sigh, came from her as her stepmother tended and caressed her. When Jean questioned her, she shook her head and made no answer. The good woman was driven to her wits' end. To her limited perceptions it was apparent that there had been a quarrel between the husband and wife about little Margaret; that Isabel, after leaving her child in safety the previous night, had come back again to see her, and had been caught in the storm, and that at 'any moment' Stapylton himself might appear to claim the runaway. 'He never could think she would take it to heart like this,' Jean said

to herself. But the strangest thing was, that Isabel took no notice of the baby after suffering so much for her. When Jean could bear the mystery and responsibility no longer, she sent a mysterious message to Miss Catherine: 'My mother says, if you ever cared for our Isabel, you're to come now, and lose no time,' said little Mary, who was the messenger and in whose hands the mystery lost none of its power. 'Lord bless me, is your mother mad?' was Miss Catherine's forcibly reply. But notwithstanding, she made haste to get her great waterproof cloak and her umbrella, and set out as soon as there was a pause in the rain to ascertain what grounds there might be for so strange an appeal.

'There is nae love lost between him and me,' Jean explained, when Miss Catherine had been introduced into Isabel's room, and had looked horror-stricken at the change in her face, without, so far as they could see, being recognised by the sufferer. 'But I couldna bear to expose the family; what am I to say to the doctor, if I send for him? When a woman is as ill as that, she should be in her ain house.'

'Say!' said Miss Catherine. 'It may be life or death—let him see her first, and tell us what is to be done, and then we will think what to say. Let Jamie go at once—if I am not mistaken there is more here than meets the eye.'

'I kent they never would 'gree about that wean,' said Jean, with her apron to her eyes. 'Eh, the darling, that I should speak of her so; I ay said there would be dispeace about wee Margaret. It would have been better to have left her with me.'

'If there had not been dispeace about that, it would have been something else,' said Miss Catherine; 'nothing good could have come out of it—nothing good was possible—it was what we all said.'

'She was well warned,' said Jean, 'if anything could be a comfort to remember at sic a time; but, poor thing, it must never be cast up to her now.'

'And where is her man?' said Miss Catherine.

This question was repeated over and over again in many a tone of wonder ere many hours had passed. The fact that he did not come to inquire after her all that evening, that no search whatever was made, but the runaway wife suffered to sink into her old home without protestation or appeal, bewildered everybody about. The doctor, and Jean Campbell, and Jenny Spence, and by degrees all the village, and even the parish, grew aghast with wonder. A quarrel about the child was a comprehensible thing, and was received by everybody with many shakings of the head, and declarations of their

own foresight. 'I ay kent how it would be,' said one after another, and for the first moment it would be vain to say that it was anything less than a sensation of triumph that burst upon the Loch. But when the husband did not appear to make friends, and when it began to be rumoured about the parish that 'bonnie Isabel' was lying ill in a fever, altogether alone and deserted by the man for whom she had separated herself from her home and her friends, pity began to take the place of this self-gratulation. This was carrying matters too far. The next day in the afternoon Nelly Spence came over the hill carrying her own bundle and little Margaret's, and with a scared and agitated face. Her story ran like wildfire round the Loch. She told the tale of the first night of terror till the gossips' hair stood on end. She told of the exit of both parties in the early morning, of Stapylton's re-entrance, of his commands to them to keep quiet and wait for their mistress's return—commands which woke in their minds the frantic thought that he had thrown her into the Loch in the darkness, and that she never would come back. They had been too much frightened, however, by Stapylton's presence and looks to do more than make furtive little excursions round the house, and furtive questions to the neighbours, none of whom had seen Isabel. He had taken his meals as usual, cursing Nelly's 'neebor' for her bad cookery, and had occupied himself packing all the day long; and at night he had gone away, neither of the terrified women having strength of mind to stop or to interrogate him. It was too late after his departure to take any further steps. They sat up half the night in their terror, still thinking it possible that Isabel might return. That morning they had roused the village and made all sorts of frantic searches for her, and at last had ascertained that she had been seen on her way to the Glebe. Such was the story which Nelly told with unbounded fullness of detail. It left the public in more profound ignorance and wilder wonder than before. He had gone away taking everything with him; he had not even asked for her before his departure, and she was too ill to afford any explanations.

It was when Isabel was just beginning to wake into faint gleams of returning life that the visit was paid her which made so much commotion on the Loch. Everybody had learned by this time that Stapylton had 'taken it upon him' to refuse permission to his wife to visit Ailie at Ardnamore. And when Ailie, herself pale as a spirit and so weak that she had to be lifted out of the carriage, passed through the village on her way to the Glebe, the whole population stirred with a hope that now

at last the explanation was to come. The cottage was unusually full at the time, of nurses and attendants. Miss Catherine herself rarely left the little parlour where she waited the chances of Isabel's strange disorder; and Nelly Spence was in charge of little Margaret, and her mother came and went helping Jean to attend upon the patient. It was thus into a little community, with all grades represented, that Ailie came leaning on her mother's arm. She was worn to a shadow, and so weak that she could scarcely keep upright; over her white dress she wore a large veil of black crape, for she was now a widow. Her appearance was not less extraordinary than before, but her visionary eyes had lost their wildness, and a softened expression had come over her face.

'I am dying myself,' she said to Miss Catherine, 'and I would fain see Isabel before I go. Ye needna fear me now. I would like to tell her just that I'm reconciled in my mind. She has seen my sore trouble. No, I'll say nothing to disturb her; I'm dying myself, as you may see.'

'Hoot no, my bonnie woman! hoot no!' said her mother who supported her; 'when the bonnie weather comes, and you get your feet on the May gowans—ye see, Miss Catherine, it's a' the grief and trouble she's had, and poor Ardnamore taken from us so sudden at the last.'

But to Miss Catherine there was nothing sublime in the spectacle of the dauntless old woman supporting on her arm the dying creature who ought to have been the support of her old age, and facing the world courageously with her pathetic fictions to the last. To her, Janet was no champion-mother, but a worldly old woman, bent upon elevating the social position of her child. 'I am not afraid of you, Ailie,' said Miss Catherine, 'why should I be? Isabel, poor thing! has her reason, though she's weak. Sit down, and I'll ask if she can see you. You are far from strong yourself.'

'I am dying,' said Ailie, softly, with a smile which lit up her face. 'Eh, and when I think upon Margaret! She will be *my* sister where I'm going. Tell Isabel that. Life has been a burden and a trouble, though I thought it was so good. Tell Isabel. It has been hard on her, too.'

'Oh, how hard!' Miss Catherine said to herself, with an involuntary tear, as she went into the inner room. 'Two young creatures, still so young, one overwhelmed in the conflict, and about to die and escape from it; the other fated, perhaps, to remain and live and bear the scars and the brand of it for years. Was it not well with

Margaret, who, of all the penalties of living, had only death to bear? The old lady bent over Isabel in her bed, and kissed her forehead with unusual emotion. 'Can you see Ailie, my dear?' she asked, and a little gleam of eagerness came into the sufferer's eyes. Miss Catherine ushered the visitors into the room, but would not stay to listen to the strange conversation that passed between them. It was not that she was wanting in curiosity, but that the pity of it was too much for even her strong nerves. She returned to the parlour with a flood of impatient tears coming to her eyes. They had been to blame. Ailie had married for—what? This severe judge said for ambition—a man incomprehensible to her, whom she did not, and could not love, and who sought her only in the madness of disappointment and grief. Such was the common-sense view of the matter, and the end was, as might have been expected, misery and despair. And Isabel; Isabel had done worse than Ailie. She had sinned against her womanhood—her dead husband, her living child. She had loved, she had taken her own way, and misery was the result. Miss Catherine, looking back into her own experience, could remember a time when she too had wanted her own way, and had given it up proudly, and sacrificed her heart. Was she the better for it? This long calm of hers, or Isabel's brief fever—which was the least like that vision of joy and strength which the imagination calls life? A few hot tears fell from her old eyes. It was hard to pronounce any judgment, even now.

Ailie tottered to Isabel's bedside, supported by her mother's arm. 'Since you canna come to me, I have come to you,' she said. 'Isabel, I've come to tell ye I am reconciled in my mind. He sent me over word before he died that *yon* was no message from the Lord; it was his own mad will, and no my God that said it. We've sinned, and we're punished; but His word stands fast. Eh, but I'm content!'

'Oh, Ailie,' said Isabel, looking wistfully from the bed, 'I cannot follow what you say.'

'Never mind, it will come back some time,' said Ailie; 'and I'm come to bless you, Isabel Diarmid. I was uplifted in my mind, and deceived myself, but you, a simple lass, spoke the truth. Ye were right when ye bid me not to wed, and ye were right when ye bid me say farewell to him that came back nae mair. He perished with the sword, as I said; and now I'm going after him, and to Margaret. Margaret will be *my* sister. O Isabel, rouse up in your mind! Give me a word to say to Margaret; I'm going to her now.'

The tears came in a flood to Isabel's eyes. All this

time they had burned with fever, neither sleep nor tears coming to refresh them. 'O my Margaret!' she cried; and then Jean interposed in terror, not aware how great a relief to the patient's brain was this outburst of tears.

'She canna bear it,' said Jean. 'O Ailie, my woman, come away.'

'Jean,' said old Janet, fiercely turning upon her, 'that's no a way to speak to Mrs. Diarmid of Ardnamore.'

Thus the tragic and the trifling met together as everywhere. Ailie took no notice of either. She stooped over the bed, and kissed, as she had never done before, the face of the woman who had been so strangely connected with her life.

'I'll tell her a' you say,' she cried; 'I'll carry her a' the love in your heart; and the Lord bless you, Isabel. You're no like her, and you're not like me, but the like of you is best for this life.'

'O Ailie, my bonnie woman,' cried Jean, unmoved by the mother's remonstrances, in the height of her own anxiety, 'she canna bear it; come away!'

'Life's an awfu' riddle—an awfu' riddle,' said Ailie, 'and her and me we've guessed wrong; but the Lord will set a' right.'

These were Ailie's last words so far as concerned the inmates of the Glebe. When she died, some time after, her death-bed ejaculations became the property of the parish, and were repeated far and wide, and finally made into a book. It was said that the power returned to her at the last, and that she prophesied and ended her existence in a blaze of spiritual triumph. These last utterances of exulting faith were heard by many, and could not be gainsaid. But this was the end and sum of her testimony so far as concerned Isabel and her own life.

CHAPTER XLVII

ISABEL'S recovery was slow and tedious. The strain, both of body and mind, had been so great, and her spirit was so broken, that it was often in doubt whether the uncertain balance would be for death or life.

The parish had waited, after the first flash of wonder was over, with patience scarcely to be looked for, for the explanation which might be expected on her recovery. And the little circle round her had specially cherished this hope, as was natural. Miss Catherine, in her higher degree, and Jean Campbell and her friends, waited with

calm, knowing that the revelation must first be made to them. 'Don't weary yourself, my dear,' said the former. 'I will wait your own time.' But Isabel made no reply to this insinuated question. She ignored their wonder with a silent resolution which it was difficult to make any head against. 'When you have anything to say to me, you know I am always at your service, Isabel,' Miss Catherine added, a week after she had first signified her readiness to listen. 'Thank you,' Isabel had said, faintly; but she said nothing more. Then Jean made an attempt in her own way.

'My bonnie woman,' said Jean, 'eh, it's pleasant to see ye in your ain house again, as I never thought to see you! But you'll no bide? I canna expect it, I ken that. And, oh! how we'll miss you, the bairns and me.'

'I mean to stay if you will let me,' said Isabel, whose pale cheek always flushed when this subject was propounded. 'Margaret and me.'

'Let you!' cried Jean: 'and dearly welcome. As if it wasna your own house and hers, the bonnie lamb! But it's mair than I could expect that you should stay.'

Isabel made no answer. She treated Jean's artful address as a mere remark, and no question. Her face would be a shade sadder; her eye more languid all the evening after—but that was all.

Perhaps, of all the eager, curious people about her, the one most difficult to silence was the Dominie, who had taken to coming across the braes every evening while Isabel was so ill, and now found it difficult to give up the habit. He would sit opposite to her in the little parlour while the spring evening lengthened, and watch her words and her looks with an inquisition which he could not restrain. 'It's like old times to have ye back,' the Dominie would say; and a faint smile would be Isabel's answer. She was always at work now—reading much—trying to teach herself a variety of new accomplishments, labouring at a dozen different pursuits with a pathetic earnestness that went to her visitor's heart.

'What do you want with all these books?' he said, as he sat at the parlour window looking out upon the darkling Loch.

'To learn,' she said. They were some of the minister's old Italian books, of which he had been so fond.

'To learn!—what for? It's an accomplishment will be of little use to you,' said the Dominie; 'unless it is *there* you are going when you leave here.'

'It is for Margaret,' said Isabel, with a quivering lip—'I would like her to learn when she is old enough what her father knew.'

'Ah, that's a good thought,' said the Dominie, taken by surprise; and then he added, 'But you cannot give your life to little Margaret—nor carry such things about with you through the world.'

'I will have time enough here,' she said, under her breath.

'But, my dear!—we cannot expect you will be here all your life—that would be good for us, but ill for you.'

'And why should it be ill for me?'

'Isabel! I must go back to your old name,' said the Dominie; 'I cannot call you by that lad's name. Are you another man's wife, or are ye no?'

And then the self-sustained creature, who had resisted so many attempts to penetrate her secret, fell into a passion of sudden tears.

'I am his wife,' she cried, 'but I will never see him again. Call me Isabel, or call me by my good man's name; and ask me no more.'

Strong as the Dominie's curiosity was, he could not persist in face of this appeal and of the tears which accompanied it; but he carried the news to Miss Catherine, who day by day became more perplexed and more anxious to know the real state of affairs. His partial success inspired the old lady. Next day she went up to the Glebe, determined to show no mercy.

'Isabel,' she said, solemnly, 'it's time, for your own sake, that your friends should know. I am not speaking of the world. You may keep silence as you please for them that's outside, but your friends should know. I saw ye married with my own eyes; there could be nothing wrong about that?'

'There was nothing wrong,' said Isabel.

'Then, my dear, tell us—tell me—what *is* wrong? Has he gone to America, as they all say?'

'So far as I know,' was the answer, spoken so low that the inquisitor could scarcely hear.

'And do you mean to go after him, Isabel?'

A shudder ran through her frame. 'Oh no, no—never more!' she cried, hiding her face in her hands. If it was longing or loathing, Miss Catherine could not tell, but she thought it was the former. Whatever it is, she is fond of him still, was what she said in her heart.

'Is not that giving up your duty?' Miss Catherine continued, pitiless. 'Isabel, there is no love lost between him and me; but I could not counsel you to abandon your duty for all that.'

'Oh, ask me no more questions,' cried Isabel, with a gesture of despair; and that was **all** that could be torn from her whatever anyone might say.

When she was well enough to go so far, she made a secret pilgrimage to her husband's grave. The whole parish knew of it before the week was out, and drew its conclusions; but nobody suspected why it was that she sat so long, wrapt in musing and solitude, in that spot where the minister and Margaret slept side by side. 'God grant her her wits, puir thing!' said one of the village gossips. 'There she sat among the grass; and every bit weed that caught her eye, and the moss on the tombstone, all cleared away. You would have said it was a gardener in a garden at his work.' Some thought it was penitence for her sin against him, and some that it was a compunctious regret for her 'good man.' Nobody knew that Isabel had buried in her husband's grave something more than her grief and remorse for her infidelity—another token more awful than anything so trifling could be supposed to be. She worked at it unseen with her slender, trembling fingers, making a place for it deep under the sod, and there hid the innocent present of her first affection—the little brooch, which had been plucked from the dead man—the fatal sign which had made her existence a desolation, and rent asunder her heart and her life.

And common life crept up round her, like the rising tide on the beach, and set her softly afloat in the old habits, the old routine, the current of the past. Little Margaret rose once more to be the chief object, and occupation, and interest of the quiet days. Within the first year there came a claim upon her, of which her lawyer informed Isabel, and which oozed out through the district after a while by those invisible channels which make everybody's secrets known. It was a bill drawn upon her from a far distant corner of America, which she paid without hesitation, though it cost her many sacrifices. The same thing was repeated several times within the course of a dozen years; and then there came a letter to her, in a strange handwriting—

No one had mentioned her legal name for a long time before that. She saw only those who called her Isabel. But after the coming of this letter, it happened to her by chance to encounter the old Laird, Miss Catherine's brother, come upon a rare visit to his own country. 'So this is Isabel,' he said to her kindly, patting her head as if she had been but still a child. 'Mrs—Mrs—— I forget the name.'

'Lothian,' she said, distinctly, before the servants, as was afterwards remembered. And from that hour was called by her old name.

And little Margaret lived and grew. A woman cannot be utterly wretched, whatever tragedies may have hap-

pened in her life, so long as she has a woman-child to make her live anew. She was even happy in her way, developing into a hundred gracious forms of being, which Staphylton's wife could never have known; and had her life after life was over, like the most of us—the one, an existence brief and full with sorrow and joy in it, and a crowd of events; the other, long, tranquil, with no facts at all to speak of, marking the passage of the years—nothing to tell: but yet, perhaps, the life that bulks most largely in the records in the skies.

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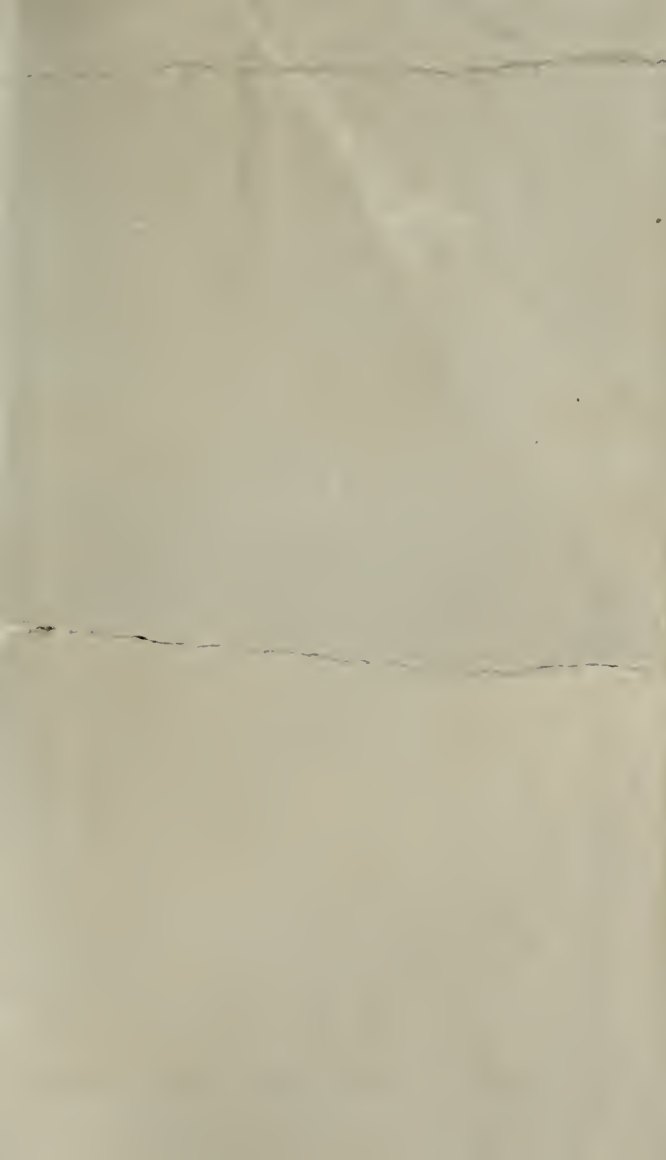
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